



How to Develop the Best-Ever Fire Support System

By Lieutenant Colonel James L. Miller

Hammer Three Zero, this is COLT [combat observation lasing team] Three Zero. BRT [brigade reconnaissance troop] has identified 50 enemy vehicles moving north. Fire target group Hotel Three Mike, "At My Command," over.

Roger, Hotel Three Mike, "At My Command." Sky Hammer reports CAS [close air support] is on station; ACA [airspace coordination area] Mike is in effect.

COLT Three Zero, roger. Forward TACPs [tactical air control parties] already have eyes on the enemy formation, vicinity Whale Gap.

COLT Three Zero, Hammer Three Zero. Steel is ready on Hotel Three Mike; 36 rockets in effect.

Roger, fire Hotel Three Mike; we are clearing the CAS in hot, time now....

COLT Three Zero, Hammer Three Zero. It has been 10 minutes—status over?

Hammer Three Zero, roger. End of mission. Hotel Three Mike CAS is off station; target destroyed.

Request BDA [battle damage assessment], over.

Roger. There are too many dead vehicles to count right now—that's going to take awhile and I am little busy right now...besides, we got them all. Stand by to repeat on the second enemy battalion....

Our Combat Training Centers (CTCs) repeatedly have reported on the shortcomings of our fire support officers (FSOs) and their ability to provide close supporting fires for the maneuver commander. As fire supporters, this is not what we want.

The scenario is representative of the occasional fire support success the *Hammer* 3d Brigade Combat Team (BCT), 3d Infantry Division (Mechanized), Fort Stewart, Georgia, had at the National Training Center (NTC), Fort Irwin, California, last summer. In this engagement, the brigade's fire support system destroyed 51 vehicles in the enemy's lead formation as it exited Whale Gap. More importantly, our success was the result of a dedicated BCT effort to ensure we had a well-trained fire support system, one capable of providing accurate, timely and deadly fire support to our maneuver forces.

How did we do it? Simply put, we decided we wanted it and put a determined effort into it. Of key importance, that decision was made by and fully supported by the brigade commander. In addition, the division artillery commander put the full weight of his support behind it as well. The Field Artillery School, Fort Sill, Oklahoma, provided additional support in the form of a fire support focused rotation at the NTC.

Basically there are five reasons we were so successful: command emphasis, experience of our fire support personnel, training, integration and our equipment.

Command Emphasis. This is absolutely *the* most important factor for fire support to work. Maneuver commanders who have not made their fire support system a priority have no one to blame but themselves when their fires fail them in battle.

Fire support coordinators (FSCOORDs) who allow this to happen are doomed to failure as well. Talk is not enough.

Everything falls into place if command emphasis is there. In the *Hammer* Brigade, the brigade commander made fire support one of his priorities. He demonstrated its importance by learning all he could about fire support, understanding the guidance he needed to give and focusing the staff on an integrated, combined arms approach to combat. He provided all the resources available to improve his fire support system and participated in the training.

The brigade FSCOORD added to this emphasis by setting his own priorities



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on fire support and dedicating limited resources, his best personnel and training time to build the fire support team. It all paid off with a fire support system that met the challenges of the NTC at an entry level that was well above the average rotational unit.

Experience of Fire Support Personnel. This is the second most important reason fire support systems are successful. We must put our most experienced, mature personnel in our fire support positions. The payoff is fire supporters who understand the system and use their experience to build success; their maneuver brothers will trust and respect them plus have confidence in them.

Our fire support element (FSE) was selected and manned in accordance with this principle, and it made a huge difference in our capabilities. Our brigade FSO was the senior major in the battalion and a previous battalion executive officer.

The assistant FSO was a new captain who had been with the battalion for three years and was selected because he had been the best lieutenant in the battalion. His selection came at great cost to the battalion as he was slated to be the battalion fire direction officer (FDO).

Our targeting officer was the senior warrant officer in the battalion and was selected for his excellence in fire support. The task force FSOs were all senior captains, prior battery commanders or had prior service experience that made them ideal fire supporters.

The task force targeting officers all were both former platoon leaders and company FSOs. One-third of the company FSOs were former platoon leaders. Our COLT was an elite platoon

manned by the best fire support sergeants in the battalion and led by the lieutenant with the most successful and lengthy fire support experience in the battalion.

Finally, our air support operations squadron (ASOS) also provided support in the same manner. The air liaison officers (ALOs) and TACPs were manned by the best and most experienced airmen available. Most had more experience than the Army fire supporters, and many had been assigned as Ranger TACPs.

One last comment on this point: we knew we had the right people in the right jobs when we started getting reports of maneuver commanders letting their FSOs run their staffs when the field grade officers could not be present.

Training. We trained the fire support system as a system every chance we got. When we couldn't train the system, we trained the individuals and teams that make up the system. If there is command emphasis, there is no excuse for not training.

Too often, FSOs try to train their soldiers and their sections without support from the remainder of the fire support system or help from the senior leaders in the brigade. More often, headquarters battery taskings overwhelm our fire support platoons.

Routinely units ignore lessons learned and negative trend reports about the shortcomings of the fire support system and don't train to correct them. Finally, when units do have the opportunity to train the fire support system, they often let concerns about gunnery overcome the need to train fire supporters.

Training FSOs. Units must train FSOs at every level and train them to train their soldiers. Our school system does an adequate job of teaching our officers fire support, but it does not train them to the level of proficiency needed. Key areas in which FSOs need unit training are listed in Figure 1.

FSCOODS must have a system in place to train and evaluate their FSOs at times other than large exercises or command post exercises (CPXs). Maneuver commanders must be convinced to do the same—integrate fire support into as much training as they can. Whenever possible, training should be hands-on, in the field and evaluated.

Untrained and inexperienced FSOs will provide fire support that mirrors their shortcomings. We can't allow that.

Working Around Taskings. Taskings are an unfortunate reality in the Army. In direct support (DS) battalions, long-term damage has been done to our fire support soldiers by repeatedly assigning them taskings. This dulls their fighting edge, limits their chances for training and severely curtails their retention.

Unfortunately, this is a difficult nut to crack. One technique that worked for us was to establish a Red-Amber-Green Cycle of training within our fire support platoons. That system allowed the task force FSEs to train as a whole (usually with their supported task force) while the Red Cycle task force fire supporters took the taskings.

- Triggers
- Maneuver Operations and Tactics
- Observer Planning and Observation Post (OP) Selection
- Leading and Directing the Integrated Targeting Process
- Use of Mr. Sids and Terrabase for Targeting and OP Planning
- Recon and Surveillance (R+S) Planning
- Integration of Tactical Air Control Parties (TACPs) into R+S Plans
- Close Air Support (CAS) Planning and Employment
- Fire Support Planning
- Fire Support Execution
- Engagement Area (EA) Development
- Training in Units

Figure 1: Key Areas in Which Fire Support Officers (FSOs) Require Training

The brigade FSCOORD further emphasized the importance of fire support training when he added the requirement for the headquarters and headquarters battery (HHB) commander to task the brigade FSO for support. That allowed the FSO to select the soldiers who would have the least impact on training and allow the fire support training plan to continue.

Training to Reverse Negative Trends. We, as an Army, record lessons learned and negative trends to develop training and improve our teams. Sadly, too often we don't carry through with a concerted effort in training on lessons learned.

Observer/controllers (O/Cs) at the CTCs joke that they can write the after-action reviews (AARs) before the unit begins its rotation. The O/Cs' experience shows that units come to the CTCs doing the same things wrong.

In our brigade, we used our last NTC AAR and the Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) lessons as our starting point for developing brigade fire support training. By the time we went to the NTC again, we were not making the same old mistakes.

Training the Entire System. Every training event is a chance to train the fire support system; there are really no good excuses for not training the entire system.

Unfortunately, units usually use a list of fire mission types to drive FA gunnery exercises and simply fire the missions in the order listed. In this type of an exercise, no one gets trained but the fire direction centers (FDCs), a few observers and the gun crews—it is not the way we'll fight.

A fire support plan and a scenario that replicates the battalion's normal missions in support of its maneuver unit should provide "the drivers" for a Field Artillery battalion gunnery exercise. The FSOs should submit a plan for the artillery battalion to support and control the timing and triggering of the missions in accordance with the maneuver plan they support. Although this type of exercise takes more effort to prepare, it is well worth it and trains the fire support system as a whole.

Maneuver gunnery exercises should be supported by the FSE in the same way, and whenever possible, the FA battalion should use its supported brigade's gunnery exercises to train part or all of the fire support system. The more training for the fire support system, the more reliable it will be in combat.

Integration. Fire supporters must ask themselves, "How well integrated is my fire support system?" Fire support is an integrative process. As such, we must completely integrate our fire supporters into their maneuver units and encourage our maneuver brothers to join our fire support training.

In addition, we must integrate our supporting BRT and airmen into our teams long before we go to CTCs or into combat. We must develop integrated staffs to produce the synchronization that allows our fire support system to be successful.

Early integration and a team approach to fire support is the key to success. A well-integrated fire support team allows everyone to understand his role in the process, train to support that role and gain confidence in and understand the strengths and weaknesses of his teammates. Figure 2 lists opportunities we took to integrate as a team.

In most cases, I have found that this integration must be forced—it does not happen on its own. But once forced, it becomes the accepted way of doing business; it takes on a life of its own and success begins to breed more success.

The trick is to force the entire team to train and work together at every possible opportunity. It will pay off on the battlefield. In the end, if your fire support team, maneuver staffs and airmen are all voluntarily attending each other's hail and farewells, promotions and ceremonies, you have done well in integrating your fire support team.

Equipment. The Army has given us a lot of equipment to support our fire support mission. Much of it is old and weary, and we clearly need new systems in a hurry. Despite that, our equipment will perform its mission, given the proper emphasis on maintaining it and training your soldiers to maximize it. Soldiers must understand the limitations and capabilities of their systems and how to employ them. Waiting for the "new stuff" to come out is not an acceptable solution.

The new equipment being fielded is top-notch. The M7 Bradley FIST (BFIST), in particular, is a great and much-needed advancement in fire support equipment. (The A3BFIST will be fielded in FY04.)

But I add a warning—if we continue the maintenance practices used on the fire support team vehicle (FIST-V), the M7 BFIST will fall rapidly by the wayside as well. FISTs cannot be successful

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| • Staff Exercises |
| • Staff Meetings |
| • Training Meetings |
| • Live-Fire Exercises (LFXs) |
| • Gunnery Exercises |
| • Command Post Exercises (CPXs) |
| • Hail and Farewells |
| • Unit Organizational Days |
| • Saint Barbara's Day |
| • Sports Events |

Figure 2: Opportunities to Integrate Fire Support and Maneuver or Build Fire Support and Maneuver Teams

with poorly maintained equipment. Maintenance must be routine and a training and maintenance priority for the FSCOORD.

Finally, fire supporters must be trained to employ their systems on the battlefield. Even the new BFIST was worthless to us when the crews maneuvered in the open and did not use cover and concealment, getting themselves killed early in the fight. Our equipment is only as good as our training to employ it.

Your fire support system can be the best-ever. The solution starts at the top with the leaders. "Confident, audacious and competent leadership focuses the other elements of combat power and serves as the catalyst that creates conditions for success." (*FM 3-0 Operations*)



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