As a kindergartner, I remembered seeing images on CNN of these large box-shaped vehicles shooting hundreds of rockets into the sky when the Gulf War started. I asked my parents what was happening and they told me that in some place called Iraq, the Army was defending people that had been attacked and needed our help. Fast forward 20 years, and I found myself leading my own platoon of rocket artillery. Unfortunately, I saw just how much had changed since I saw them in action on CNN.

When I was tasked to support a maneuver brigade at the National Training Center with rocket artillery, I was excited to see how effective we would be on the battlefield. Instead, I learned that maneuver commanders do not know how to use rocket artillery to shape their fight.

My next NTC rotation was no different. We were pushed to the side and rarely called upon to engage any target that wasn’t a stationary command post. I needed to know why my unit was seen as an afterthought and not an asset and it was not very hard to find the answer.

Decades of fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq against insurgent cells and terrorists have decimated our Army’s rocket artillery capabilities. The Gulf War was the last time the U.S. Army successfully employed rocket Fires in support of combined arms maneuver in a decisive action fight. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the shift to counter-insurgency (COIN) warfare eroded our capabilities as we reorganized to fight a different enemy. Emerging threats in North Korea and Europe have further highlighted the gap in firepower that has developed since the War on Terror began.

Our maneuver brothers and sisters have forgotten our role in decisive action. When they stopped calling for our support, we changed ourselves to stay in the fight. These changes have not been good. We are no longer organized to effectively support maneuver in a near-peer fight. Our weapons are not designed to provide mass firepower over a wide front. The Air Force has supplanted us in shaping the deep fight. All of these changes have negatively affected our...
ability to fight and win our nation’s wars. It is critical we address these changes and take steps to reverse them or we will have significant challenges shaping the fight for our maneuver forces in the future.

At the height of the Cold War, a Multiple Rocket Launcher System (MLRS) battalion was three batteries of nine launchers each for 27 launchers in a battalion. The same battalion has nearly half the firepower 30 years later, reorganized as two batteries of eight, for a total of 16 launchers. Additionally, there are only three field artillery brigades providing Fires to shape the deep fight for maneuver. Eighteenth Field Artillery Brigade supports special operations, 17th Field Artillery Brigade supports I Corps and 75th Field Artillery Brigade supports
supports III Corps. To make matters worse, 75th FA allocates three of its five rocket battalions on rotation to Korea. This leaves two battalions from 75th FA to support III Corps operations worldwide.

The Army has wisely reconstituted division artillery (DIVARTY) to be the force field artillery headquarters for divisions, but it has not given DIVARTY any organic long-range artillery to shape the fight for the division. Division and even corps artillery previously had organic assets that could engage targets and shape the deep fight. However, these were deemed superfluous in the COIN environment. Bringing DIVARTY back is a step in the right direction, but without organic long-range Fires, they are little more than administrative headquarters. Giving DIVARTY organic rocket artillery would enable them to shape the fight without taking resources from the brigade combat team. Currently, National Training Center rotations simulating a decisive action fight only allocate a single platoon of rocket artillery to the division headquarters. What was 27 launchers at a minimum is now only four.

The COIN environment has forced rocket artillery to innovate in order to stay relevant. This has led to increased focus on precision guided, high explosive weapons. The use of forward operating bases (FOB) has also changed how rocket artillery is employed in the field. Establishing and securing a position area for artillery on the battlefield is a lost art among section chiefs and platoon leaders that never left the FOB. The High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) is a fantastic weapon system that enables long-range rocket and missile precision Fires to be readily employed around the globe. By reducing weight and placing the launcher module on wheels instead of tracks, it is air mobile, however, it sacrifices half the ammunition capacity of the M270. Another consequence of the War on Terror is the U.S. Army’s pivot away from Dual Purpose Incendiary Cluster Munitions (DPICM). DPICM creates unexploded ordnance on the battlefield and that has many negative long-term consequences for military personnel and civilians alike. Those consequences do not make them less important in a conflict with a near-peer adversary. The Guided Multiple Launch Rocket System (GMLRS) rocket and Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS) are precise munitions that work great for high-value targets, but are not capable of disrupting large formations. The Russians have continued to use the BM30 Smerch against ISIS with great success and are clearly advancing their capabilities while we are content refurbishing Reagan-era technology.

This shift in priorities has given commanders the freedom to quickly move launchers from FOB to FOB in Afghanistan and Iraq to eliminate high-value targets with precise strikes and virtually no collateral damage. As a platoon leader, executive officer, and fire direction officer at the battery and battalion level of a HIMARS unit, I know how effective this platform can be when used in the COIN fight. I also have experience with how ineffective this vehicle is when employed as if it were a M270. The
high weight of a launcher on a light medium tactical vehicle chassis leaves it susceptible to mud and limits its travel to local road networks. When employed in a traditional rocket artillery role, the HIMARS is actually less mobile and delivers less steel on target than its counterpart. This is not to say that the HIMARS is not a valuable asset to the Army, but it is not designed to tackle the massed armored formations coming through the Fulda Gap or crossing the 38th Parallel. The tracked M270 certainly has its problems, but conducting operations in a decisive action fight is not among them. It outshines the HIMARS in this environment.

Maneuver commanders have grown accustomed to operating with air superiority. Our adversaries are aware of this and have spent time developing and manufacturing effective air defense systems. Their doctrine states they will not contest our air superiority from the sky, but through a proliferation of man portable air defense systems and surface-to-air missile systems. Operating under the assumption that the AH-64 and close air support will be available is wishful thinking at best, and irresponsible at worst.

To exploit our overmatch in the air and maximize our ability to fight across multiple domains, it is absolutely critical to suppress enemy air defense. Rocket artillery is one of the few platforms with the range and munitions capable of performing this mission. A platoon of M270 launches enough rockets in one volley to saturate a 500M radius with DPICM. Anything within that circle is going to feel those effects, moving or stationary. The GMLRS and ATACMS also provide the commander with the ability to reach stationary targets at range regardless of how much enemy air defense is present, eliminating the need to send an aircraft into a dangerous situation.

We may have forgotten how critical a role rocket artillery plays in combined arms, but our enemies have not. We need more rocket battalions now, and they need to be structured within the DIVARTY in order to shape the fight for the division and brigade. The Army and Department of Defense need to rethink their prioritization of expensive, precision guided munitions and bring DPICM back into the fold. Commanders at the brigade level and their fire support coordinators need to be aware of the awesome capability rocket artillery brings to the fight and use it in conjunction with air support, not as a last resort. The rocket artillery community continues to be overlooked in the Army, even by some fellow Redlegs from the cannon world. A perception exists throughout the Army that our equipment is old and outdated and we provide limited utility on the battlefield. It is our duty as field artillerymen to address this knowledge gap. Rocket artillery can shape the deep fight when air power can’t, due to weather or enemy air defense. In the fight against a near peer, this capability is invaluable and it is our responsibility, as fire supporters, to ensure commanders use it effectively.

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