



A HORSE OF A DIFFERENT COLOR

THE MANEUVER ENHANCEMENT BRIGADE

By Colonel Christopher J. Toomey

As our Army becomes a more modular force, it will no longer be tied to a divisional structure and can assemble a force based on the situation. Indeed, it is clear that the Army is moving rapidly to transform the existing divisional brigade combat teams (BCTs) into the new structures and creating new ones such as the “4th BCT” in several divisions. The current main effort is on developing units of action (UAs)—heavy, infantry, and Stryker BCTs that are stand-alone organizations purportedly tailored to the way they fight—with a nod toward the flexible two- and three-star-level units of employment (UEX) that will serve as the primary warfighting headquarters.

Across the rest of the Army, elements are also transforming to support this more modular approach by creating support brigades that are essential to the success of the force. What was formerly their division or corps predecessors are rapidly becoming sustainment brigades (division support commands/corps support groups), fire brigades (division/corps artillery brigades) or aviation brigades (division/corps aviation brigades). These support brigades—though more flexible and modernized and equipped with more robust command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR)—are in character the same as their ancestor units.

There is one support UA, however, that is truly groundbreaking. It not only has no formal antecedent—it really is a horse of a different color—but it looks

to bring to the forefront the application of freedom of action and force protection as disciplines that not only have a unique jurisdiction demanding a unique expertise but clearly recognize the evolving nature of warfare as we move from an Army based on a linear model to one adept at working in a nonlinear, noncontiguous environment that also includes the simultaneous conduct of decisive, stability, and support operations. The maneuver enhancement brigade (MEB)—currently being developed in concept by the United States Army Maneuver Support Center, Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, and on the ground at Fort Lewis, Washington with the provisional 555th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade (formerly the 555th Combat Engineer Group)—will provide the UEX, joint force, or multinational commander with a tailored, flexible, versatile force that is adept at fusing the elements of freedom of action and force protection, thus minimizing seams arising through stove pipe approaches and providing a linkage to the emerging Protection Joint Functional Concept. Additionally, it can fill a role as a force provider for nuclear, biological, and chemical (NBC); air defense; military police; and engineer assets, as well as a rear area command when properly augmented.

Characteristics

The MEB is a *tailored, combined arms force*. Aside from its headquarters element and the organic communications and logistics

elements that form the basis for commanding, controlling, and supporting the brigade, the MEB is a mission, enemy, terrain and weather, troops and support available, time available, and civil considerations (METT-TC)—dependent organization. It leverages emerging modular principles and the “plug-and-play” nature of developing forces to apply the right force for the mission. Typically, but not exclusively, the MEB is composed of engineer, military police, chemical, air defense, civil affairs, and other units that routinely function together during protection, stability, and support operations. As necessary, the situation may dictate the assignment of maneuver or other types of units to the MEB. These forces may or may not be part of the MEB at home station, but will be assigned as necessary. For example, at Fort Lewis, the 555th includes a chemical decontamination battalion, a corps wheeled combat engineer battalion, and a combat heavy engineer battalion, as well as potentially some other units, to include an air defense artillery battalion. This presents some challenges since the cohesiveness found in the more fixed BCT organizations is not currently inherent in the MEB; the MEB will need to develop the procedures to rapidly and effectively integrate units from across all Army components.

The MEB is a *networked force*. Expected to operate over long distances and throughout an expanded battlespace, the MEB will have robust C4ISR in order to ensure seamless horizontal

and vertical integration and full situational understanding.

The MEB is *joint* in nature. The MEB fills a void that is not unique to Army forces and represents an exclusive joint capability that is not found among the other services that are oriented along more functional lines. Clearly, the MEB can operate within a joint task force and is ideal in the event of stability and support operations.

Forming the Provisional MEB

The 555th and Fort Lewis were a logical choice for the initial MEB. Clearly, Fort Lewis is an installation that is developing a culture of transformation. With two Stryker BCTs already formed and the Stryker-based 2d Cavalry Regiment in transition, the community at Fort Lewis is emerging as a place with well-defined business practices to manage change. This includes exigent facilities such as the Mission Support Training Facility, a great resource for training and supporting staffs and units. Recently redeployed from Operation Iraqi Freedom, the 555th task organization represented a mix of engineer and chemical units that was inherently geared toward maneuver enhancement. Indeed, while operating with the 4th Infantry Division during Operation Iraqi Freedom, the 555th provided maneuver support and force protection for the division and operated along many of the same lines expected of an MEB. Additionally, the great diversity of echelon-above-division units at Fort Lewis provided a pool of units to draw from in developing the MEB.

Granted provisional status in October 2004, the 555th is evolving its missions and mission-essential task list (METL) to reflect expected battlefield tasks and has embarked on a rigorous training program to develop its expertise in command and control to provide freedom of action and force protection. All along, the unit is staying linked with the United States Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) proponent—the Maneuver Support Center—to provide feedback and lessons learned.

Additionally, the 555th is fully cognizant that its subordinate units may be individually committed to current operations. This is validated since one of its battalions is already deployed to Afghanistan. Currently, the 555th consists of a diverse mix of engineer and chemical forces and is expecting the assignment of air defense artillery units as they relocate to Fort Lewis.

To focus its efforts, the 555th is concentrating on providing freedom of action through line-of-communication clearance and security, construction and maintenance, and movement control. In the area of force protection, it is examining securing critical facilities and infrastructure, NBC defense and mitigation, and command and control for internment facilities. Additionally, it is exploring the MEB's role in civil-military operations, as well as limited offensive and defensive operations. Working through a series of exercises virtually supported at Fort Lewis, the 555th is gaining insight into the desired composition of the end-state MEB, while learning how to operate as an MEB with the forces in hand.

The MEB concept was recently explored during Exercise Eagle Talon, a command post exercise held at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. The 555th served as an MEB as part of a UEx operating with various UAs. Charged with command and control of force protection across the UEx and area of operation-wide freedom of action, the MEB demonstrated that it could control a wide variety of forces as it provided the required level of freedom of action and force protection across the area of operation.

Additional Challenges

In managing any change, there are challenges that require attention. The continued development of the MEB as an effective force is no different. The MEB concept has a harmonizing effect across multiple branches. Yet, it goes against a tradition of having pure functional brigades—such as engineer, military police, chemical, and air defense artillery—that typically maintained

resident expertise at the corps and division levels. The MEB does not take the place of the functional brigades nor their expertise that is applied at the broader units of employment-operational (UEy) level and can be applied at the UEx level if the situation dictates. All branches that are prime candidates for inclusion in the MEB need to look at how they can best evolve their forces to work as part of the MEB.

Another challenge is developing leadership. The MEB will require leaders who are broad-based and can operate across heretofore branch-specific functional lines. Developing these leaders from typically stove-piped career paths is a challenge that must be addressed as the MEB concept progresses. No single functional branch has supremacy; rather, it is essential that the best leaders be selected for key assignments.

Toward the Future

The development and establishment of MEBs will provide commanders with a versatile combat force that can be tailored to a wide spectrum of operations. Ideally suited to meet requirements in the contemporary operating environment, the MEB is a key supporting UA that will enhance the ability of both maneuver BCTs and the other support brigades and ensure that our Army is successful in current and future operations. 

Colonel Toomey commanded the 555th Combat Engineer Group and 555th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade (Provisional) from 2003 to 2005. He currently commands the Afghanistan Engineer District in Kabul.

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