

UNDERSTANDING THE PROTECTION CELL

By Major Richard L. Comitz

The protection warfighting function (WFF) is new in U.S. Army doctrine. Many of us may serve as members of a protection cell at some point in our careers. As a chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear officer attending the Command and General Staff College (CGSC), I suddenly found myself in the protection cell during division and higher level mission exercises. I quickly realized that I was unsure of the protection cell definition or purpose. To fully integrate the protection WFF into a division staff, the function must be fully understood. This article contains information that I have learned while researching the capabilities and limitations of the protection cell, and it is intended to initiate discussions and make recommendations about how the protection cell should function and evolve in the future.

Doctrinal Resources and Definitions

The protection function and five other WFFs were introduced to the Army with the release of Field Manual Interim (FMI) 5-0.1.¹ WFFs replaced battlefield operating systems, paralleling them with Marine Corps functions and aligning them with joint functions introduced in Joint Publication (JP) 3-0. While FMI 5-0.1 describes the basics of WFFs, further details are now available in Field Manual (FM) 3-0. According to FM 3-0, a WFF is “a group of tasks and systems (people, organizations, information, and processes) united by a common purpose that commanders use to accomplish missions and training objectives” and the protection WFF consists of “the related tasks and systems that preserve the force so the commander can apply maximum combat power.” FM 3-0 also describes how commanders employ WFFs to help exercise battle command. Discussions regarding protection doctrine are currently underway, with future doctrine expected to outline the tasks and operation of the protection cell in more detail.

Protection is also a joint function; and since joint functions originated at about the same time as WFFs, there seems to be a similar level of understanding about how they work and how they should be implemented. JP 3-0 defines joint functions as “related capabilities and activities grouped together to help JFCs [joint force commanders] integrate, synchronize, and direct joint operations.” JP 3-0 suggests that the joint function of protection focus on conserving the fighting potential of the joint force through—

- Active defense measures.
- Passive defense measures.
- Technological and procedural applications.
- Emergency management responses.

Tasks encompassed by the protection function are also listed in JP 3-0; several of these mirror the tasks listed in FM 3-0.

Staff

At first glance, it is difficult to determine the composition of a protection cell. Although FM 3-0 and JP 3-0 list the tasks encompassed by the protection function, they do not assign responsibility to specific personnel. However, FMI 3-0.1 goes a little further in describing the staff that usually comprises the protection cell and in explaining possible generalized tasks. Current staffs are still very Napoleonic in nature; as a result, when functionally organized, protection staffing is often ad hoc. There are protection personnel at the brigade combat team level, but they do not constitute a “cell.” According to division modified tables of organization and equipment (MTOEs), members of the protection cell are not grouped together as a cell, but are broken out by traditional branches (air defense artillery, chemical, military police, engineer). The same organization—or lack thereof—exists with higher-level MTOEs as well. All of these functions are supervised by a chief protection officer, whose branch and rank are not defined.

Discussions regarding protection cell doctrine have resulted in the recommendation that protection cell membership not include representation from every functional element, but that selected members form a dedicated staff capable of coordinating with appropriate personnel and special staff elements. Doctrine writers recommend that protection cell members typically include provost marshal; chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and high-yield explosives (CBRNE); explosive ordnance disposal; air and missile defense; engineer; operations security; and recovery personnel.

Although the composition and function of the protection cell are unclear, I estimate from the current doctrine and MTOEs that there are about forty personnel (eight in the tactical command post) in the division level protection cell, forty-two personnel (eight in the tactical command post) in the corps level protection cell, and sixty personnel in the theater army level or U.S. Army Service Component Command protection cell.

Current discussions are focusing on the role of the cell “protection chief,” who serves as the principal advisor to the commander on all matters related to the protection WFF.

Responsibilities

Protection is probably the most diverse and complicated of the WFFs. Simply stated, all protection capabilities necessary

to safeguard bases, secure routes, and protect forces are integrated under the protection WFF. However, according to FM 3-0, the protection cell is responsible for air and missile defense, personnel recovery, information protection, fratricide avoidance, operational area security, antiterrorism, survivability, force health protection, CBRNE operations, safety, operations security, and explosive ordnance disposal. It is the integration and synchronization of these areas that increase the difficulty. In addition, the protection cell must also be integrated into future plans—a difficult task, given the limited number of members in the protection cell.

Attempts to explain how the protection cell should work are currently underway. The most recent discussions have focused on the use of the protection framework when developing plans and executing operations. The framework consists of the following components:

- *Detection*: the sensing of the full range of friendly and enemy activities.
- *Assessment*: the process of sorting through information to arrive at possible recommendations for the commander.
- *Decision*: a determination regarding the appropriate recommendation for the commander.
- *Action*: the execution of associated tasks.
- *Recovery*: the restoration of capabilities for the purpose of getting back into the fight.

The protection cell only recommends actions; the execution must be directed by the Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans (G-3).

The protection framework meshes well with the battle command and operational art framework, which is introduced in FM 3-0 and consists of understanding, visualizing, describing, and directing. Because these two frameworks are so closely aligned, it is easier for the protection cell to help the commander execute the battle command. There is also an effort underway to show how the protection framework should be integrated into the military decisionmaking process.

One of the biggest challenges we have faced in CGSC is the integration and synchronization of the protection cell into the rest of the staff. A good working relationship between the protection cell and other staff sections is necessary. There must be a liaison officer from the protection cell in each of the other staff functions, or there must be a method for the protection cell to understand the common operational picture.

There is a great deal of attention being focused on the development of two lists for the integration of protection—the critical asset list and the defended asset list. With limited protection assets, these lists can help commanders focus and prioritize protection assets. In addition, the working group concept is being considered as a possible way to synchronize the protection WFF with other staff functions.

Due to the lack of structure and well-defined responsibilities, it will take a few years for the protection cell to reach its full potential. Some cross-training and education at all levels will

also be required to remove redundancies and allow the cell to work efficiently.

Recommendations

I offer the following recommendations with regard to the protection WFF:

- Organize MTOEs by WFF.
- Educate leaders at all levels (officer and enlisted) about the functions of the protection cell and how the protection cell can contribute to the operation.
- Expand doctrine to encompass sample products and recommendations about the integration and operation of the protection cell.
- Collect tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) and lessons learned concerning protection cell operations in garrison and deployed environments; publish the results frequently.
- Add a forum on the Chemical Knowledge Network to collect TTP and lessons learned.

Questions

I ask the following questions to spark further discussion:

- Are there too many tasks grouped under the protection cell?
- Does the protection cell consist of the correct mix of personnel?
- How does the protection cell coordinate with other WFFs?
- How do we educate and integrate CBRNE and other Soldiers who comprise the protection cell about how we want the cell to function?

Conclusion

It will take some time for the protection cell to become completely integrated and synchronized into staffs at all levels. I hope that this article generates discussion about the integration of protection cells into current operations and that it serves as a springboard for Corps professionals to collect and share experiences and TTP. 🙏

Endnote:

¹The six WFFs listed in FMI 5-0.1 are intelligence, movement and maneuver, fire support, protection, sustainment, and command and control.

References:

- FMI 5-0.1, *The Operations Process*, 31 March 2006.
- FM 3-0, *Operations*, 27 February 2008.
- JP 3-0, *Joint Operations*, 17 September 2006.

Editor's note: *FM 3-10, Protection, is currently under development by the U.S. Army Maneuver Support Center Directorate of Training.*

Major Comitz is currently a CGSC student. He holds a bachelor's degree in chemistry from the U.S. Military Academy, West Point, New York, and a master's degree in organic chemistry from the Florida Institute of Technology, Melbourne, Florida.