



Route Clearance Shortfalls in the Maneuver Enhancement Brigade

By Major Terry L. Stewart

As the United States Army continues to fight the War on Terrorism and wrap up its transformation to the modular force concept, the need for multifunctional units continues to rise. With the brigade combat team (BCT) the focal point for future rapid decisive operations, the United States will remain prepared for future conflicts well into the future. However, with the ever-changing face of warfare and the evolving complexities of the conflicts we face today, the nation more than likely will be involved more heavily in stability operations well into the future. In its current construct, I believe that the BCT is not suited to perform all aspects of stability operations, even with much-needed augmentation by functional brigades. Also, key to success on tomorrow's battlefield will be the ability to rapidly transition from combat operations to stability operations. A capability gap in today's force—and vital for future campaigns—is the ability to conduct stabilization as part of expeditionary land warfare. To bridge this capability gap between combat operations and stability operations, the U.S. military will need to grasp the concept of progressive stabilization.

To meet the capability requirements necessary for progressive stabilization, the U.S. military must form units that have embedded stabilization capabilities alongside traditional warfighting capabilities. In today's military construct, the maneuver enhancement brigade (MEB) is the primary organization that will be at the forefront of progressive stabilization. However, the MEB needs route clearance capability to detect and neutralize improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and maintain freedom of movement along ground lines of communication (LOCs) in the division support area.

Under its key task of conducting maneuver support operations, one of the supporting tasks is route clearance operations. The MEB is responsible for directing, integrating, and controlling the capabilities necessary to clear an area, location, or LOC of obstacles or impediments that could become a hazard or hindrance to friendly movement and maneuver or the occupation of an area. The MEB relies on mobility augmentation companies to clear and proof LOCs in the division support area. In the current operating environment, the IED threat and its defeat are the focus of every echelon of command. The likelihood of our adversaries attempting to disrupt operations throughout the entire area of operations is highly probable. If the IED threat cannot be completely defeated, our forces must be capable of detecting and neutralizing them. The MEB, as an owner of terrain, must have that capability to allow unimpeded use of friendly LOCs in division support areas.

The capabilities that a mobility augmentation company and a route clearance company bring to the fight are drastically different. Mobility augmentation companies can conduct hasty route clearance operations, primarily in support of BCTs during offensive operations. They focus their efforts on clearing assault lanes through obstacles. Route clearance companies have radio frequency jamming and extensive proofing and exploitation capabilities. The MEB would be greatly augmented by a route clearance company with robust deliberate route clearance capabilities. The route clearance company can scan, identify, exploit, and potentially clear hazards along main supply routes (MSRs) in the division support area by using its organic RG-31 mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicles, Buffalo mine-protected vehicles with the ground standoff mine

detection system, and Husky vehicle-mounted mine detectors. Route clearance companies, combined with explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) augmentees, allow for exploitation and—with the use of forensic kits—thorough investigation of suspected hazards.

It has been shown that our adversaries will exploit opportunities to emplace IEDs along LOCs unless they can be secured at all times. To minimize the risk to subsequent convoys travelling in the division support area, the assets in the route clearance company can be continuously employed to maintain open LOCs. Maintaining freedom of movement along LOCs, MSRs, and alternate supply routes (ASRs) within the support area is imperative to resupply operations and critical in protecting the force. The three organic route clearance platoons within the route clearance company provide the added capability of multiple clearance missions simultaneously, focusing on high-threat areas within the division support area. Route clearance companies, under the new modular force concept, have been the most effective units in maintaining freedom of movement in Iraq and Afghanistan. The MEB needs these added capabilities for its supporting task of route clearance.

Although the MEB possesses robust capabilities to exercise mission command over multiple functions in the division support area, it would benefit from greater route clearance abilities. This is a key task, not only in support of units operating in the division support area but also in support of follow-on forces and BCTs operating forward of the support area. The ability to continuously move logistics to the forward areas of the battlefield will be crucial to the success of the U.S. military in future stability operations involving insurgency activities. The MEB should be augmented with additional engineer forces in the form of route clearance companies. To effectively ensure mobility, engineer, military police, and EOD Soldiers must be correctly portioned into elements capable of performing all aspects of route clearance.



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References

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