



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.



Major Stewart is Group Engineer, 3d Special Forces Group, Fort Bragg, North Carolina. His past assignments include company commander in the 37th Engineer Battalion (Combat) (Airborne) during Operation Iraqi Freedom; 20th Engineer Brigade (Combat) (Airborne) training officer; and Project Engineer, Far East District, United States Army Corps of Engineers.

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Although the MEB has a much greater responsibility during stability operations, it is not perfectly designed to own an operational environment. The implication is that the owner will be able to respond to any threat decisively and quickly. I believe that a major offensive operation by a determined enemy would challenge an MEB. It cannot be assumed that the transition to stability operations is going to be a step in the right direction without setbacks. The situation in Afghanistan, where the enemy is increasing lethal operations, is an excellent example. Rather than repelling sustained attacks, the MEB is structured to secure itself and fulfill a supporting role to maneuver commanders.

The MEB is best suited to fulfill an endless list of operational tasks in a supporting role. The units that are combined under the MEB headquarters all specialize in support operations with one exception—the battalion-size tactical combat force (TCF), with its commensurate impact on sustained combat operations if the MEB is an operational environment owner. Conversely, a BCT typically has multiple battalions with specialized training in combat operations. The logistics units in a BCT fulfill their roles under the protection of the maneuver battalions.

An argument can be made that BCTs are expected to perform stability tasks, despite their focus on major combat operations and maneuver tasks, and therefore that an MEB should be able to switch back and forth as well. I disagree with that argument. An MEB is designed to "enhance" the capabilities of the BCT. An engineer battalion does not function best solely as an engineer battalion. Instead, it accomplishes much more when individual companies are in support of ongoing stability and support operations within a BCT's area of operations. The natural progression in combat operations is major combat operations followed by stability and support operations. Thus, BCTs transition to stability operations with the understanding that they will perform to the best of their ability while measures are taken to augment the BCT force with stability-focused units.

It is imperative that the strengths, weaknesses, and capabilities of the MEB—in contrast to a BCT—be carefully evaluated before an MEB is given complete control of an area of operations. We cannot make the fatal assumption that stability operations equate with an end to combat operations. That is simply not the case, and the price for such an assumption is casualties. The MEB is an incredible combat multiplier—a headquarters with a long list of capabilities that significantly improve the battlefield environment. But it is not designed to control an area of operations; leave this responsibility to the BCT, since it trains to that end state every day. The role of the MEB is highlighted in stability operations.



Major Parrish is the current operations officer for the 3d Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, Fort Carson, Colorado. He holds a bachelor's in sociology from North Dakota State University at Fargo.