Command and Control of a Heavy Engineer Task Force

By Second Lieutenant Joseph P. Morsello

When the 505th Engineer Battalion deployed to Iraq in October 2005, it was attached to the 555th Engineer Brigade under the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault). The 505th's missions were throughout north-western Iraq, resulting in decentralized employment of elements into a multidisciplinary task force—Task Force Morsello (TFM). The process for requesting engineer support did not allow for an immediate response to the needs of the warfighter. Due to enemy action, the warfighter was unable to wait for mission directives to reach the task force in the field. TFM incorporated three command and control techniques that allowed effective response to the needs of the Soldier on the ground: task force organizational structure, a mission-oriented approach, and freedom of action.

Organizational Structure

The executing elements were organized for specific missions, and tasks and equipment were anticipated for the accomplishment of these missions. TFM was composed of horizontal and vertical elements with maintenance and medical support. Personnel consisted of heavy equipment operators, truck drivers, battalion medical support personnel, and mechanics. The traditional hierarchical structure of the Army was flattened, establishing a high degree of flexibility and responsiveness.

Mission-Oriented Approach

In November 2005, TFM was sent to Forward Operating Base (FOB) Summerall to construct a new entry control point (ECP) and provide general force protection support. The task force acted according to a mission-oriented approach rather than a mission-directed approach to provide effective support to the warfighter in the field. Having direct contact with the customer, it was able to respond to the request for engineer support with elements ready to execute within hours of receiving the task. As new FOB mission tasks—outside the original ECP mission directive—were executed, they were included in daily status reports to company and battalion commands.

Joint planning with Headquarters and Headquarters Company (HHC), 187th Infantry Regiment, ensured that existing project plans were modified and the customer's requirements were met. More importantly, TFM's fluid response had a direct impact on supporting warfighters on the ground in the Bayji area. The task force succeeded in accomplishing seven simultaneous missions and still completed the north ECP ahead of the original schedule.

TFM places barriers around the Muhallabiyah Police Station perimeter.

TFM Soldiers patrol the streets near the Biaj guard towers using M1 Abrams tanks.

Carrying this mission-oriented approach into FOB Sykes, TFM became a highly autonomous unit because the 3d Armored Cavalry Regiment (3ACR) was very receptive to this type of operational technique. The 3ACR regimental engineer informed them of requested engineer assets from units in the field and gave his intent based on the requests. TFM then conducted a reconnaissance of the project site, gathered the customer's requirements, and wrote the statement of work (SOW). The SOW and the request for engineer support were reviewed by the regimental engineer and submitted to the 555th through the 101st.

Modifications to the original SOW for ongoing and follow-on missions followed the usual process for requesting engineer support. Under the 3ACR, the process was executed quicker. The SOW was then written, in cooperation with the customer, for the new requirements. Written directives were ready within a few days, allowing planning to begin on future projects. The usual project management administrative needs were addressed as engineer assets were diverted for immediate-need missions and SOW modifications. The schedule was quickly updated and passed up the chain of command and, most importantly, the customer understood the impacts on existing projects, such as time delays and assets diverted for other missions.

Freedom of Action

The efficient execution of TFM's mission pipeline at both FOB Summerall and FOB Sykes was greatly facilitated by its freedom of action at the task force level. Task force personnel knew the intent of their leader and customer, allowing them freedom to overcome design and on-site work issues as projects progressed. Work never stopped because their leader was unavailable when questions or problems arose. Inclusion of the senior E5s and select E4s in the reconnaissance and planning process provided invaluable technical expertise. Select personnel were also part of the development of the SOW and design process, enabling task force personnel to have a personal stake in the project's objectives and schedule. This allowed junior NCOs to have significant freedom of action. They knew the project's goal, final product, and intent.

TFM's decentralized operation methods contributed to its ability to improvise. The task force always performed its own reconnaissance and, through on-site inspections, determined equipment needs and potential problems.

Conclusion

The task force organizational structure, mission-oriented execution, and multiechelon freedom of action allowed many tasks and projects to be executed in parallel. Task force organization allowed the custom building of a tailor-made force that met specific mission requirements, ensuring that the right equipment, operators, and support were available when needed. Additionally, TFM was able to integrate elements from the 43d Engineer Battalion, 3ACR, and 425th Transportation Company during the Muhallabiyah Police Station project. Acting according to the mission intent to provide effective support to the 187th and 3ACR, rather than specific written mission directives, allowed an immediate response to the needs of the Soldiers on the front lines of the counterinsurgency. Accomplishing this was a direct result of joint planning with the customer. TFM's joint planning and responsiveness to the customer's needs eliminated any fears that directed operations would derail. The task force operated with a considerable amount of freedom to conduct reconnaissance and execute missions. The reconnaissance pull methodology, in combination with conducting its own recons, allowed detailed planning and the efficient flow of work through the project pipeline.

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