Live Fire . . . Heavy

By Captain Alexander J. Buehler

Thunderbase, this is Metal 36. Adjust fire, over . . . BMP in the open . . . Dustoff 6, this is Metal 36 . . . I have three casualties, two ambulatory and one KIA. Similar radio transmissions echoed over the Wolverine network for ten intense days during the 94th Engineer Battalion (Combat) (Heavy) live-fire exercise—called Protective Wolverine—at Grafenwoehr training area in Germany.

The concept of such an exercise was foreign to the construction engineers of the 94th, which is assigned to the 130th Engineer Brigade. Even the most seasoned Wolverine soldiers, having spent more than five years in the organization, could not recall an event that was remotely similar. The genesis occurred more than ten months before, when the operations officer pitched a concept at the annual training strategy seminar. His suspicion, which included a perceived shortcoming in basic combat skills and a lack of confidence in weapons employment, was confirmed by the reaction of the officers and senior noncommissioned officers in the audience. The support for the live-fire concept was overwhelming, and Exercise Protective Wolverine steadily progressed from a concept sketch to a deliberate plan.

The Intent

The battalion commander's intent for the exercise was clear: prepare the leaders and soldiers of the battalion to respond to enemy contact, employ organic and nonorganic weapons systems, and survive and carry on with the construction mission. The overarching objective was to preserve and prolong the battalion's ability to construct in potentially hostile situations.

An additional aim was to define a model for leaders in the battalion to plan, resource, and execute large-scale training exercises according to the deliberate eight-step training process (see article " Cobra Gold '99 Tests the Eight-Step Training Model," *Engineer*, April 2000). The commander also quantified success for this exercise. Leaders would become more comfortable with making command decisions in a highly stressful environment. Furthermore, they would cultivate an appreciation for the fog of battle and understand its impact on deliberate planning. Most importantly, however, individuals would walk away from the exercise as better soldiers—more confident in basic tactics, more adept at integrating and synchronizing weapons systems, and more competent as construction engineers and warfighters. Finally, the commander specified one standard for implementation: safe execution with deliberate risk management.

The Plan

The S3 launched the military decision-making process, while the executive officer (XO) set the wheels in motion to stand up a responsive support network for the exercise. The plan was exhaustive with many considerations. The S3 synchronized a complex and expansive execution matrix, published all pertinent orders, specified evaluation criteria in painstaking detail, resourced and scripted the scenarios, mastered the muddled bureaucracy of range control, coordinated for all external resources, and developed a thorough plan to ensure preparedness for the exercise.

Such planning seems somewhat routine in the absence of external constraints; however, it was the indelible presence of these constraints, which were abundant and ever changing, that brought challenge to the planning and pliability to the execution. Limitations included no heavy fire on German holidays or after 0200 hours and narrow windows of opportunity for air medical evacuation (MEDEVAC) and C-130 overflights. Adaptation would be paramount.

In addition to planning the training, the S3 devised a notional operations order with a uniquely realistic enemy situation. All elements of the exercise were crafted to fit neatly into the big picture. The scenario was a coalition army fighting westward, leaving bypassed units and special-purpose forces in the battalion sector. Generally operating in 12-man teams, the forces would seek to impede construction operations, harass Wolverine soldiers, and disrupt logistical supply centers.

Concurrent with the diligent preparations of the S3, the XO harnessed the staff energy to cement a support cell. The burden of support was deliberately withheld from the unit level. All commanders would focus purely on combat training and safe execution. The "beans and bullets" would be left up to the battalion. This included a feeding plan with two separate mess operations along with Class I logistics trains, which allowed feeding downrange to reduce time in transit.

Additionally, the XO—along with the S4—planned the largest ammunition receipt, storage, and distribution plan in battalion history. Notwithstanding a major Class I and Class V push, the XO considered all details—no matter how trivial—and integrated them into the overall support network. The companies would not need to consider sustainment of their soldiers.

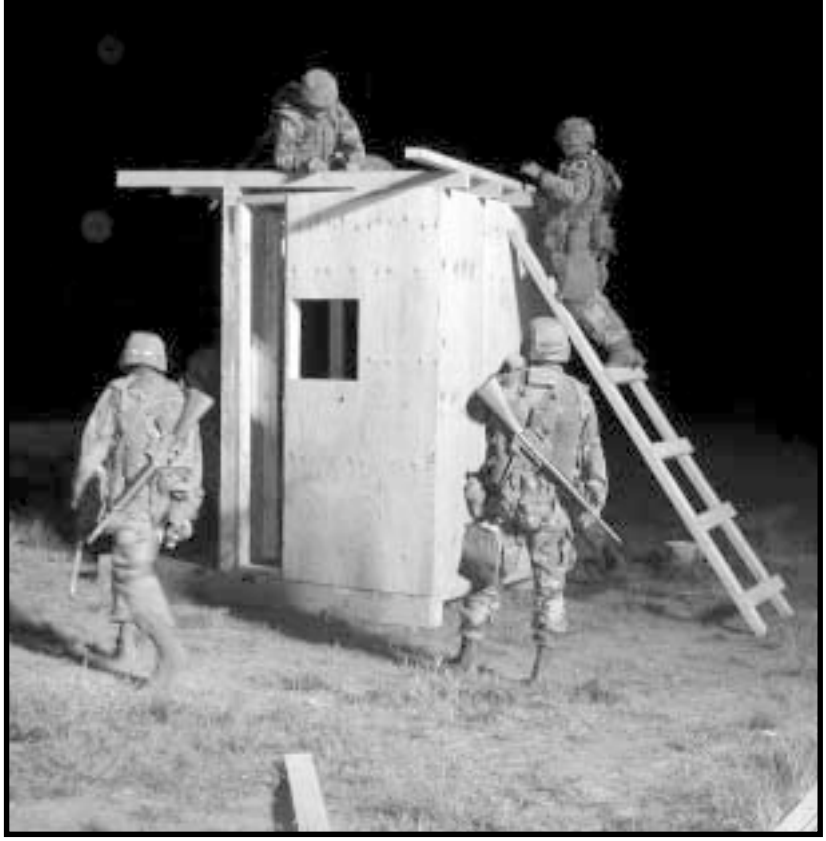
The platoon synchronized direct and indirect fire to suppress the enemy and then removed casualties via air MEDEVAC.

The Method

Exercise Protective Wolverine was not only a live-fire exercise, but it was also a platoon-level external evaluation. First, companies deployed from home station, conducted a convoy, and occupied a tactical assembly area, all of which were critically observed by observer-controller-evaluators (OCEs). Next, platoons cycled through a casualty evaluation, treatment, and evacuation (CETE) lane, training with battalion medics and air MEDEVAC personnel to perfect these skills before game day.

After successful validation of the CETE training, platoons proceeded through a fire-maneuver (F-M) lane, which focused on movement under direct fire, weapons discipline, and the initiation and control of fire. After a two-day hiatus for internal training, the platoon began the first of two capstone exercises, the convoy ambush lane. Conducting a tactical convoy en route to a construction site, the platoon was confronted with an enemy ambush. A complex blocking obstacle (a wire/mine configuration), a BMP in the open, and enemy soldiers to the front combined to intensify the complexity of the scenario and place an uncomfortable level of stress on the platoon leadership.

Platoons integrated and massed fire, called for 120-millimeter-mortar indirect fire, and ultimately removed casualties via air MEDEVAC. The "crawl-walk-run" training strategy was necessary to facilitate safe execution on the lane. After a crawl led by the OCEs, the platoon validated a daytime blank iteration—or walk phase—before the run phase, which added live ammunition to the training.



The platoon carries on with the construction mission.

Subsequently, platoons validated a nighttime blank iteration before the night run phase. The minimum number of iterations for this lane was five, assuming that platoons validated both blank iterations on the first try.

After the convoy ambush lane, the platoon progressed to the culminating event—the jobsite security lane. During this lane, the platoon conducted a tactical convoy to the jobsite, occupied the area, established jobsite security, initiated construction operations, and—upon enemy contact—suppressed and reduced the threat. Similar to the convoy ambush lane, the platoon synchronized direct and indirect fire to suppress the enemy and then removed casualties via air MEDEVAC. Likewise, OCEs implemented an identical crawl-walk-run methodology. Unlike the convoy ambush lane, the platoon installed, tested, and fired claymore mines as part of the validation. Finally, after successful completion of four lanes—CETE, F-M, convoy ambush, and jobsite security—companies regrouped, consolidated, and redeployed to their home station.

Exercise Protective Wolverine provided training for platoons, but the aforementioned summary does little to capture the training that occurred behind the scenes. Companies conducted extensive training before the exercise, and all officers attended a call-for-fire class at the Combined Arms Training Center at their home station in Vilseck, Germany. Additionally, all OCEs underwent an incremental train-up session and became validated on their lanes before their first iteration.

OCE teams were composed of six personnel from various backgrounds to maximize the collective experience and overall effectiveness of the team, and they adhered to a day-on, day-off schedule to maintain focus. As any veteran officer in charge (OIC) can attest, running a range on the Grafenwoehr training area is no simple undertaking. Throughout the 15-day Protective Wolverine exercise, the 94th Engineer Battalion occupied Range 117, managed an ammunition holding area on-site, survived numerous "courtesy" inspections from range control, and turned over the range and facilities without a hitch. Two officers worked alternating 24-hour shifts, manning the Range 117 tower. Several FM radios, two main frequencies, two Motorola frequencies, and two fixed lines combined to create a unique command and control challenge, but the tower OICs met the challenge head-on. Range control expressed ongoing approval for the exercise at large.

The numbers speak volumes regarding the intensity and complexity of the exercise. Ammunition expenditures included ninety thousand 5.56-millimeter rounds; ninety 81-millimeter illumination rounds; one hundred forty-four 120-millimeter high-explosive rounds; thirty M18A1 claymore mines; and an abundance of simulators, smoke grenades, and pyrotechnics. Black Hawk pilots logged more than fifty MEDEVAC flights in support of the operation. The live fire was . . . heavy.

The Aftermath

As platoons and companies redeployed, Range 117 was cleared and turned over. One resounding afterthought remained: the exercise was excellent, and the commander's intent was met. A value-added aspect of the exercise, which exceeded the commander's intent, involved the intangible team building that underlined the training. As leaders and soldiers prepare for upcoming construction missions in Africa, Poland, and Germany, they go forth with more confidence and proficiency, knowing full well that—in the event of hostile aggression—they are better prepared to survive the threat and carry on with their construction missions. And as for the organization, the 94th Engineer Battalion proved that combat heavy engineers can safely and effectively conduct a live-fire exercise and . . . the fire tends to be heavy.

Captain Buehler was the S4 of the 94th Engineer Battalion (Combat) (Heavy), 10th Engineer Brigade, Vilseck, Germany, when this article was written. He has since left the Army and is attending the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania. His previous assignments include civil engineer for the 94th Engineer Battalion, where he deployed to Kosovo and Albania, and platoon leader, Task Force Able Sentry, Skopje, Macedonia. He is a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy, the Engineer Officer Basic Course, and airborne and air assault schools.