

VOL IV

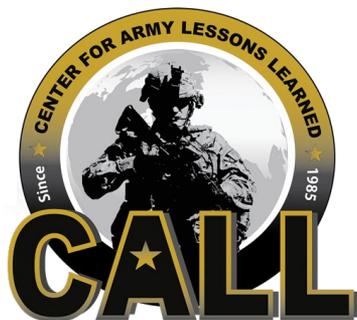
MUSICIANS OF MARS

THE MUSTANGS' WAR (DELIBERATE ATTACK)



CENTER FOR ARMY LESSONS LEARNED

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Musicians of Mars Volume IV: The Mustangs' War Tactical Vignettes for Professional Discussion

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Foreword

“There is still a tendency in each separate unit ... to be a one-handed puncher. By that I mean that the rifleman wants to shoot, the tanker to charge, the artilleryman to fire ... that is not the way to win battles. If the band played a piece first with the piccolo, then with the brass horn, then with the clarinet, and then with the trumpet, there would be a hell of a lot of noise but no music. To get harmony in music, each instrument must support the others. To get harmony in battle, each weapon must support the other. Team play wins. You musicians of Mars ... must come into the concert at the proper place at the proper time.”—MG George S. Patton Jr., Address to the 2nd Armored Division, 08 JUL 1941

In 2016, the Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) gave a contemporary update to the classic *Musicians of Mars* (1990). This was done in response to guidance from United States Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) that indicated the Army’s brigade and battalion leaders needed a training aid for decisive operations. This new work was released as *Musicians of Mars II*, with the intent that it would facilitate the Army’s return to the “blocking and tackling” of decisive action operations. With inputs from the Combat Training Centers (CTCs) and the Maneuver Center of Excellence, *Musicians of Mars II* (MoM II) was an instant hit with company and battalion-level leaders.

In response to this positive feedback, CALL decided to produce two follow-up volumes. The first, *Musicians of Mars III: The Cobra Strikes* (MoM III), picked up with LTC Milner and Task Force (TF) Mustang, addressing the question of “what next” following its successful defense in engagement area (EA) Blackjack. Published in February 2019, MoM III reflected the new Field Manual (FM) 3-0, *Operations*, recent events in Eastern Europe, and the Army’s conscious effort to examine large-scale combat operations (LSCO). Within the constraints of security and the narratives of MoM II, MoM III attempted to capture the effects of battle in multiple domains and facets of “gray-zone warfare” at the battalion and TF-level.

This book, *Musicians of Mars IV: The Mustangs' War* (MoM IV), will be the second follow-up to MoM II. By design, it is more to the format of the epic *Defense of Duffer's Drift* as opposed to a tactical decision text (for example, John Antal's *Tank Platoon and Infantry Combat*). Its focus is on tactical leaders' decisions as TF Mustang transitions from a hasty pursuit to a more deliberate offensive operation to restore the Bolcavia (the host nation) and Arcania (the aggressor nation) border. As with previous volumes, tactical leaders' decisions, both good and poor, are designed to stimulate discussion of small-unit training, leadership, professionalism, and planning in a LSCO. Characters in the work, as well as their subordinates, are human and will make mistakes. They will also use realistic language, talk about their interests, and display prejudices or anger toward enemy forces that may alarm some readers. MoM IV will display leader progression as its protagonists advance through combat operations. However, as combat situations are fluid, events will reflect the fog of war that impacts both friendly and hostile forces.

With regard to the presented enemy forces, this publication assumes near-peer opponents will strive to conduct conflict through proxy paramilitary forces. The primary motivator for this will be to exploit gaps in international law and contemporary treaties. Despite their paramilitary nature, hostile units will be able to affect Army operations across the entire spectrum of conflict. Therefore friendly forces, as in MoM III, will execute mission command in a degraded and disrupted electromagnetic environment including the degradation of digital communications and GPS signals. In addition, joint fires continue to be limited due to the presence of a hostile integrated air defense system. Arcanian forces continue to effectively employ indirect lethal and non-lethal fires, and the ubiquitous presence of hostile unmanned aircraft systems (UASs) reflect the reality of recent Eastern European and Middle Eastern operations. Readers should not overly focus on the "how" of these factors, but instead engage in a professional discussion of how TF Mustang deals with them.

CALL anticipates that this final volume in the *Musicians of Mars* series will facilitate unit-level professional development in the same manner its three predecessors did. MoM IV is intended to build upon insights and issues observed at the CTCs during recent rotations. Whether discussing combined arms breaches or reconnaissance and security operations, LTC Milner and his subordinates are intended to be an avenue through which battalion and field grade officers can initiate a professional discussion with their subordinates.

The unit and events depicted in this publication are completely fictional. The task organization has been updated in order to reflect current doctrine. In order to maintain continuity, TF Mustang's personnel do not reflect recent changes in Army personnel policy with regards to combat arms. Astute commanders and staffs will be able to discern how this scenario could play out with various near-peer opponents and substitute those nations if they feel it is justified. Conducting up-tempo operations in a decisive action environment is a distinct expectation. Planning operations while a formation is simultaneously executing tactical missions in a highly dynamic and time-compressed environment is a perishable skill, and almost two decades of counterinsurgency (COIN) operations have eroded much of the Army's institutional knowledge. The timing of events in this work is intended to address and reinforce the tempo and demands of LSCO, and its author's hope is that its use in your OPDs and NCOPDs is rewarding.



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Introduction

The nations of Bolcavia and Arcania, including any references to cities, towns, or other locations, are fictional, as are the characters of the story. Any reference to actual names or places is coincidental and not intended. References to U.S. and coalition forces and previous combat operations are provided only for context of the fictional scenario.

This vignette was written to emphasize critical synchronization tasks, combat leadership principles, and factors for consideration. Its primary audience is junior leaders at battalion echelon and below, but it is also applicable for professional development programs at all other tactical-unit levels. The importance of integrating and synchronizing available combat power, both lethal and nonlethal, in the decisive action environment against potential hybrid threats is critical to unit success on the battlefield. The authors acknowledge that it is somewhat lacking in representation of all warfighting functions (WfF), but this was a result of both space constraints and the directed target audience.

When this project started, the Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) identified specific tasks from ADRP 1-03, *The Army Universal Task List*, dated October 2015. These tasks applied to offense, defense, and stability operations in decisive action. These tasks were coordinated with the Maneuver Center of Excellence to emphasize specific areas of importance. Current doctrinal references, applicable to the principles of offense, defense, and stability operations, were applied in the context of the story. Many of those documents are listed in the references. In addition to those listed, principles and tactics, techniques, and procedures from Army Techniques Publications (ATPs), Training Circulars (TCs), and Field Manuals (FMs) applicable to all WfF were used in development. The specific tasks applied to the scenario are:

- Conduct Tactical Maneuver, ART 1.2
- Conduct Passage of Lines, ART 1.2.8
- Occupy an Attack and Assault Position, ART 1.5.2
- Occupy and Establish a Battle or Defensive Position, ART 1.5.3
- Overcome Barriers, Obstacles, and Mines, ART 1.6.1
- Conduct Breaching Operations, ART 1.6.1.1
- Conduct Gap-Crossing Operations, ART 1.6.1.3

- Enhance Movement and Maneuver, ART 1.6.2
- Conduct Counter-mobility Operations, ART 1.7
- Conduct Reconnaissance, ART 1.8
- Conduct Maneuver Support Operations, ART 1.10
- Integrate Fires, ART 3.1
- Employ Fires, ART 3.2.1
- Conduct Surface-to-Surface Attack, ART 3.2.1.1
- Employ Close Air Support, ART 3.2.1.2.2
- Employ Air and Missile Defense, ART 3.4
- Provide Combat Casualty Care, ART 4.3.1
- Provide Medical Evacuation (Air and Ground), ART 4.3.2
- Prepare for Tactical Operations, ART 5.1.2
- Reorganize Units as Part of a Reconstitution Effort, ART 5.1.3.6.1
- Conduct Public Affairs Operations, ART 5.7
- Conduct Electronic Warfare, ART 5.9.2
- Synchronize Information-Related Capabilities, ART 5.12
- Conduct Civil Affairs Operations, ART 5.15
- Prepare Fighting Positions, ART 6.6.1.2
- Prepare Protective Positions, ART 6.6.1.3
- Implement Operations Security, ART 6.10
- Assault an Objective, ART 7.1.2.2
- Conduct a Counterattack, ART 7.1.2.3
- Conduct an Area Defense, ART 7.2.2
- Attack by Fire an Enemy Force or Position, ART 7.5.1

Through the mission command philosophy, commanders understand that subordinates and staffs require a clear intent to guide their actions. Leaders must be able to clearly portray intent to subordinate leaders, enable and empower subordinate leaders to execute critical tasks, and continue to lead and assess throughout execution of missions to ensure success at all levels.

Training at individual and collective levels sets the conditions for synchronization. Standards must be met or set. Leaders must integrate key assets and enablers into collective unit training plans. In many cases, this requires creativity and initiative to account for those assets that may not be organic to the training unit. Leaders must identify the critical mission tasks across the spectrum, actively pursue available resources for training, and execute training to the established standards. Each piece of the orchestra must practice individually and then collectively in order to achieve the harmony of synchronization.

TF Mustang Task Organization

TASK FORCE MUSTANG (1-26 IN)

Tactical operations center (TOC) (Mustang Main)

Scout Platoon/1-26 (Call sign Sauron)

120 mm Mortar Platoon/1-26 (Call sign Hammer)

Medical Platoon/1-26 (Call sign Mercy)

Communications Platoon/1-26 (Call sign Spark)

1/2/46th Air Defense Artillery (ADA) (Avenger) Attached (Call sign Hawkeye)

A/9th Engineer (Attached)

TEAM ANVIL (+)

1/A/1-26 Infantry (Bradley Fighting Vehicle [BFV])

2/A/1-26 Infantry (BFV)

1/277 Armor Bolcavia (BL) (T-72) Attached

TEAM BADGER (+)

2/B/1-26 Infantry (BFV)

3/B/1-26 Infantry (BFV)

3/C/1-26 Infantry (M1A2)

3/C/1-18 Armor (M1A2)

TEAM BANDITO (+)

1/B/1-45 Infantry (Stryker)

2/B/1-45 Infantry (Stryker)

3/B/1-45 Infantry (Stryker)

4/B/1-45 Infantry (mobile gun system [MGS])

1/C/1-45 Infantry (MGS)

TEAM COBRA (+)

1/C/1-26 Infantry (M1A2)

2/C/1-26 Infantry (M1A2)

1/B/1-26 Infantry (BFV)

2/1/A/9th Engineer Squad (-)

TEAM DAGGER (+)

1/C/1-18 Armor (M1A2)

2/C/1-18 Armor (M1A2)

1/B/1-26 Infantry (BFV)

3/A/1-26 Infantry (BFV)

3/1/A/9th Engineer Squad (-)

**E FORWARD SUPPORT COMPANY (FSC)/177TH BRIGADE
SUPPORT BATTALION**

Distribution Platoon

2nd Platoon/177th Maintenance

Anvil Field Maintenance Team

Badger Field Maintenance Team

Cobra Field Maintenance Team

Dagger Field Maintenance Team

CHAPTER 1

Crossings

“Green One, execute!”

With those words, CPT Hernandez, Cobra 6, initiated the resumption of Task Force (TF) Mustang’s advance north toward the town of Zhodkiva. Dubbed Objective (OBJ) DIME, Zhodkiva was a provincial capital of 5,000 in the nation of Bolcavia.

“This is Green One, roger!” replied 1LT Dietze, platoon leader (PL) of 1st Platoon, B/1-26 IN. Cross attached to Hernandez’s Team (TM) Cobra, Dietze had managed to survive TM Badger’s near annihilation the day prior. Now the junior officer’s platoon was tasked with seizing a small roadway bridge across the Stamos River.

“Mustang 6, Cobra 6, I am initiating operations on OBJ PENNY,” Hernandez said, referring to the roadway bridge in front of him. Cobra had already conducted reconnaissance to the bridge and the immediate far side, only to find two dozen bloated bodies, two wrecked 100mm anti-tank guns, and other detritus but no actual enemy forces.

“Roger, Cobra 6,” LTC Milner, TF Mustang’s commander, replied. “Keep me informed. TM Anvil, stand by to initiate crossing.”

Seems odd that they would do nothing to try to defend this bridge, Hernandez thought. Their opponents were an ethnic Arcanian paramilitary group that had dubbed themselves the “Arcanian Guardian Militia” (AGM). Allegedly, the AGM existed to “protect the ethnic Arcanian people from the depredations of the Bolcavian government.” In reality, the AGM was a tool by which Arcania intended to destabilize the Bolcavian government and therefore justify military intervention against their former province.

“Black Six, Red One, negative contact with enemy forces on the far side,” 2LT Depaul, PL of 1/C/1-26 IN reported.

Going to have to get used to him talking with a broken nose, Hernandez thought. Depaul had bounced his face off the front of his tank commander’s (TC) hatch the night before while driving into a stream. The fact that he had done so while engaging an enemy infantry section was the only saving grace in CPT Hernandez’s mind.

“Roger, Red One, continue to overwatch,” Hernandez said.

Where in the hell are they?

(See Figure 1-1.)

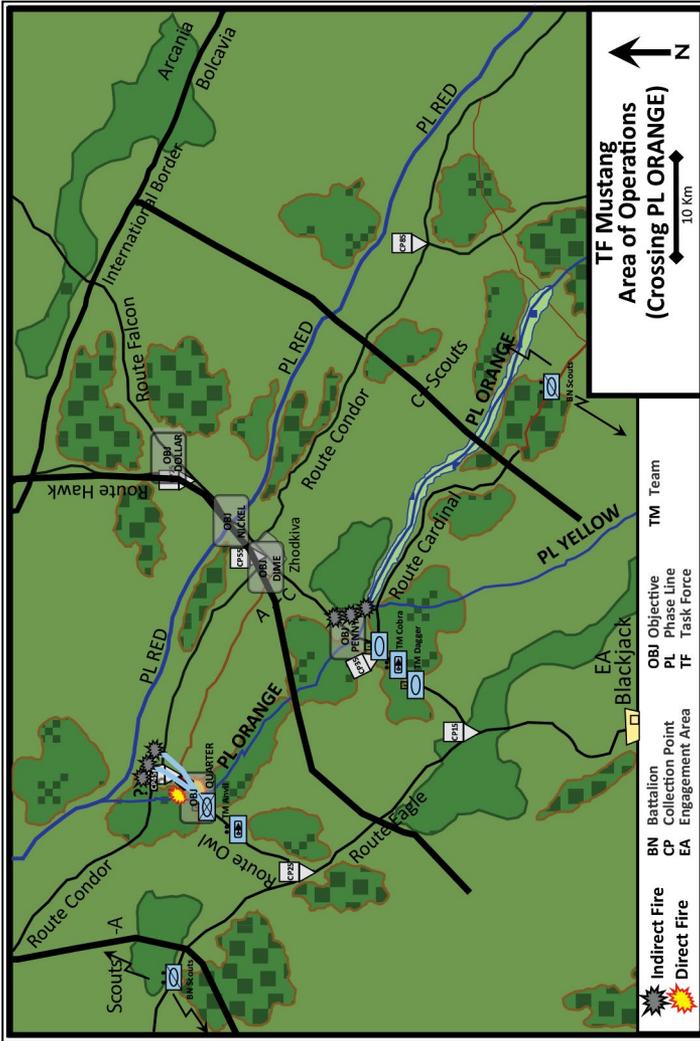


Figure 1-1. TF Mustang area of operations (crossing PL ORANGE)

The night before, the AGM had put up a fight against TM Cobra as they approached the bridge. The burned circle of grass where one of Green Platoon's Bradleys had succumbed to a 100mm round was mute testimony to that. There had also been an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) that had attempted to conduct reconnaissance, which 1st Platoon had felled with a multi-purpose anti-tank (MPAT) round. So the eerie quiet concerned Hernandez, even as the breach team moved forward to blow a hole in the hasty minefield leading up to the bridge.

Glad we did the preliminary breach last ... CPT Hernandez's thought was interrupted by the sound of incoming mortar rounds. Four of the rounds burst approximately 500 meters east of the bridge. Startled, the engineers moving forward to conduct a manual breach briefly dropped to the ground. After a moment, the noncommissioned officer (NCO) leading the detachment stood up and started admonishing his Soldiers to move forward.

I need to remember that NCO's name, Hernandez thought. The narrowness of the footpath Staff Sergeant (SSG) Bolten's team had breached the night before prevented the entire engineer platoon from getting involved. The SSG, pushing his Soldiers forward, had apparently started the conflict as the platoon's junior squad leader, until an improvised explosive device (IED) had killed the unit's platoon leader and platoon sergeant.

That is a cautionary tale on why you don't put the entire command group in one vehicle when going to the CAR (combined arms rehearsal), Hernandez thought. He'd certainly taken note of that part of the story when he'd asked where the engineer PL was.

"Sir, why didn't we use a MICLIC (mine-clearing line charge)?" his loader, SPC Augustine, asked with concern as another group of mortar shells landed. This time, the barrage was off in range, landing between C66 and C14. Hernandez heard a distant rumble of artillery from the south, followed by the sound of shells passing over their head.

Someone is about to wish they had displaced, Hernandez thought.

"Aug ..." SGT Molnar, C66's gunner started to admonish the loader.

"It's okay, SGT Molnar," Hernandez said. He pointed at the bridge. "According to the S-2, that bridge is rated to just barely hold an M-1. If the MICLIC carried long, we would end up either detonating it on the bridge or having to wait for an EOD (explosive ordnance disposal) team to come 'safe' the line."

“Oh,” SPC Augustine said, his eyes widening somewhat as he processed the issue.

“We might be acting too cautiously, but that beats going for a swim,” CPT Hernandez said.

SPC Augustine nodded, then turned back to keeping an eye on the sky for more unmanned aircraft systems (UAS).

I hope his OCS (officer candidate school) packet goes through, Hernandez thought. SPC Augustine was a sharp Soldier, having been three years into college before he and his wife, Karen, found themselves expecting their first child. Augustine had joined the Army for the benefits and so his wife could finish her accounting degree, but Hernandez had noticed the SPC had a knack for leadership.

“Black Six, Longstrider Four,” his radio crackled. “Fire in the hole!”

“Roger, fire in the hole,” Hernandez replied. There was a bright flash and roar as the engineers’ breaching explosives set off some sort of secondary explosions. Hernandez saw a large piece of metal flash up into the sky, turning lazily as it arced back toward Red. Before anyone could call out a warning, the plate landed a mere 10 yards ahead of C11.

“What the hell was that?” someone said over the command net.

“Stop the chatter,” 1SG Gegg, Cobra 7, snapped over the command net.

“SITREP (situation report),” CPT Hernandez said, fighting to keep his voice calm.

There was a long pause.

“Black Six, Longstrider Four,” came the engineer NCO’s shaken voice.

“The hasty minefield is gone. Suspect one large IED is gone with it. Route (RTE) Falcon is cratered, moving forward to assess the bridge.”

“Roger Longstrider,” CPT Hernandez said. He heard 1LT Dietze, TM Cobra’s executive officer (XO), passing Longstrider’s report up to TF Mustang HQ.

“Black Six, Red One.”

“Send it, Red One.”

“Looks like we had a chunk of asphalt land in front of us with a piece of metal affixed to it. Red Four says it looks like some sort of large pressure plate.”

Wonder who that was intended for? Hernandez thought, a chill going up his spine.

“Anvil 6, Mustang 6, did you copy Cobra 5’s last transmission?” LTC Milner asked.

“Roger, I’m passing word to my engineer element right now,” CPT Wang, A/1-26 IN’s commander replied. “Will proceed with caution to the ford site.”



CPT Li Wang put his hand mike down and reached for his Kevlar.

“Anvil 5, Anvil 6,” he said over his company net. “You monitor battalion, I’m dismounting and going forward.”

“Roger, Anvil 6,” 1LT Loggins, his executive officer (XO), replied. The young officer’s tone conveyed just what he thought about that plan.

I didn’t get this old by being stupid, Wang thought.

“Red One, I’m en route to your position,” Wang continued. “Griffin One, meet me at A11.”

“This is Griffin One, roger,” came the engineer lieutenant’s reply.

“This is Red One, roger,” 2LT Farley, his 1st Platoon leader, answered.

CPT Wang grabbed his protective vest, grunting as he climbed down A66’s side. The Bradley was located approximately 200 meters southwest of OBJ QUARTER, a bridge and ford site that TM Anvil was responsible for seizing. His Red element was 100 meters to his front, while his 2nd Platoon (White) was in overwatch 300 meters to the east. Two hundred meters behind A66, a Bolcavian tank platoon (Purple) stood ready to advance forward and provide fire support to Red should the need arise. The T-72s’ engines were an unfamiliar sound, being strangely similar to, yet clearly different than, the Bradley’s own diesels.

Looks like Cobra has drawn the enemy's attention that way, Wang thought, listening to the distant artillery impacts. Let's see if we can use the distraction effectively.

A66's ramp door opened. CPT Wang's radio-telephone operator (RTO), SPC Maclemore, stepped low through the opening, turning sideways to squeeze out before coming to his full height. Looking like he was 12 going on linebacker, Maclemore was a compassionate reassignment from Hawaii who had been assigned to TM Anvil just in time to deploy with them. Given his size, CPT Wang doubted the young Soldier was going to be his RTO for long.

*"He just screams 'I should be carrying the 240 ...,' "*CPT Wang thought, not for the first time.

"Sorry sir, stupid radio didn't want to turn on," Maclemore said apologetically.

"You're fine, SPC Mac," Wang replied with a hand wave. "Top is aware of the problem, I'm aware of the problem, and if the S-6 shop didn't have a shortage we would have a replacement on hand."

The young specialist looked mollified, if only slightly.

"Got your mother's letter yesterday," CPT Wang said with a smile. SPC Maclemore started to color, the radio forgotten.

That worked like a charm, Wang thought.

"Sir, if you need me to ..." SPC Maclemore began, causing Wang to chuckle.

"No, it's fine," CPT Wang said. "She reminds me of my mom, and I'm glad we were able to get things straightened out with getting her on your Tricare."

SPC Mac nodded at that as the two of them started walking forward to A11. Both men moved in a combat crouch once they'd covered 50 meters, moving from tree to tree up the slight rise to 1st Platoon's position. The four *Bradleys* were on a slight rise overlooking phase line (PL) ORANGE, the bridge, and the ford site. It was roughly another 500 meters to the far side of the river.

I'm still leery of driving into that, Wang thought, the sounds of the rushing water growing louder.

The Bolcavians had blown several small dams upstream as part of their retreat. That, plus the rains that had coincided with the Arcanian offensive, put PL ORANGE at near flood stage.

I don't care what Iron 2 says, Wang thought. That looks too deep to ford.

"I just hope this round of chemo did the trick," SPC Mac said worriedly. "It's tough."

"I remember when my mother had her bout with breast cancer," Wang replied with a nod. He guided the two of them toward a large tree, then dropped to one knee and gestured for the radio hand mike.

"Red One, Anvil 6," he said, noticing Wyvern One approaching from his right.

"Anvil 6, Red One," 2LT Farley replied.

"Drop your ramp, I am moving forward," Wang stated. With that, he handed the hand mike back to SPC Mac and began bounding forward to the next tree. His RTO followed, the two of them moving from cover to cover as the Bradley's ramp dropped. Seeing his movement, Wyvern One and Four both dropped to a crouch and began following suit. 2LT Farley stepped onto A11's ramp as it finished dropping, looking all the world like a homeowner welcoming the neighbors to his barbecue.

"Sir, we're Redcon ..."

(See Figure 1-2 on page 14.)

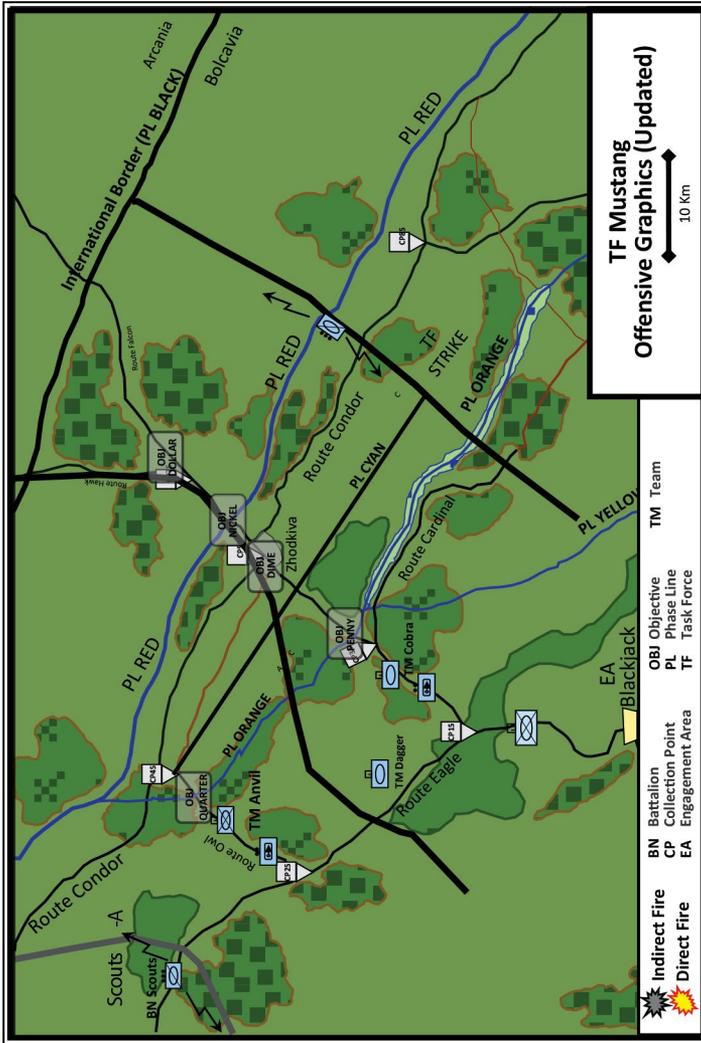


Figure 1-2. TF Mustang area of operations (updated)

The sound of the rifle round going just past his head was followed by a *thwap* and surprised grunt from SPC Maclemore. Wang threw himself to the ground as the far woodline erupted in a fusillade of machine gun and, alarmingly, anti-tank fire.

The first Spigot missile, its crew having failed to account for wires dropping into the river, went out of control and arced over A11 to explode in the branches behind Wang. The second, its crew similarly poorly trained, landed short and skittered past A11 in a shower of sparks and arcing rocket fuel. The large missile landed 10 feet away from Wang and began to spin around like a cheap Fourth of July firework, its long nose and dark gray fuselage seeming incredibly close to Wang.

“Contact front! Contact front!” someone yelled from the inside of A11 as the Bradley’s turret began rotating.

“Get the ramp up! Ramp up!” Wang heard 2LT Farley say, even as machine gun rounds ripped into A11’s front slope. Then everything was lost in the cacophony as 1st Platoon, then 2nd Platoon, began returning fire to the far wood line.

Damn it! Wang thought, rising onto one knee and then turning to run back toward the large tree behind him. He was brought up short by SPC Maclemore’s lifeless body, the RTO flat on his back with a large hole in the left side of his chest. Wang knew in an instant the man was dead. The weapon fired at him was clearly a large-caliber rifle that had passed through him, his body armor, and the radio he was carrying.

Damn! Wang had time to think, just before several rounds of machine gun fire landed around him. With a sharp lance of pain, he felt something gouge into the back of his right leg, the impact knocking him to the ground. He staggered, then forced himself to his feet as he stumbled toward the tree. Looking down at his limb, Wang could see a spreading stain of red.

The concussion from a T-72 main gun knocked him flat as Purple's lead tank came roaring down the trail toward A11. Struggling to regain his breath, Wang watched as the tank rumbled almost directly at him. Waving his hand weakly, Anvil 6 felt the first pangs of fear as the tank grew larger and larger. The vehicle was so close, he could hear the clunk of the autoloader as it prepared its next round. Just as he was about to attempt shouting, the vehicle pivoted to the left and passed him in a spray of dirt. Choking on the diesel exhaust, Wang had just managed to labor to his feet when the next Bolcavian T-72 started to pass to his right. With an audible creak as the driver hit the brakes, the second T-72 stopped a bare five meters to his left, the turret coming around rapidly to aim at some distant target.

Oh ... Wang started to think, realizing the second tank's crew could not see him. He never got to finish his thought as the second T-72 fired, sending him onto his back. CPT Wang's helmet slammed hard against a tree, and his world went dull ...

When Wang returned to full consciousness, two sets of hands were pulling him up against the side of A66. He recognized the voice of Wyvern One shouting for a medic, even as she turned to fire a burst back in the general direction of the far bank. The dull explosions of mortar fire among the distant trees told him that Anvil 5 or his fire support team (FIST) vehicle had gotten Mustang's 120mm mortars involved in the fight. Looking down at his leg, Wang saw that someone had cut his uniform open and put a hasty bandage on his thigh.

"SIT ..." he mumbled, then fought through the haze. "SITREP!" Wyvern One looked at him in surprise, then regained her composure. Wang gestured for the two 1st Platoon Soldiers dragging him to stop, then fought to his feet. It was a move he immediately regretted as his vision swam, but he managed to stay standing.

OK, that was one hell of a knock on the noggin', he thought.

"Sir, Purple believes they have destroyed both Kornets on the far side of the river," she said after a moment. He noted that Wyvern One was carrying her own radio, its hand mike clipped to her Kevlar. "Anvil 5 has called for fire, Wyvern Four is getting ready to move forward with the breach."

Wang nodded at her report, still feeling as if his thoughts were full of cotton. "SPC Mac ..." he started to say, then stopped as he recalled what had happened to his RTO. The Bolcavian T-72s fired again, the rippled volley causing him to start then gasp in pain. The Soldiers had dragged him back to A66, and he hobbled over to the side of his track.

“Get back to your platoon,” Wang said, suddenly unable to remember either Soldier’s name. “Thank you.”

Both men nodded, then looked at each other before rushing back toward 1st Platoon’s position.

“Sir, my radio’s on the company net,” Wyvern One said.

Wang struggled to remember her name, then it suddenly came to him.

“Thank you, Lieutenant Brigante,” he replied, taking the hand mike. Before he depressed the hand mike, he took a moment to listen.

“Purple One, that smoke is perfect. Wyvern Four, stand by to initiate the ford breach,” 1LT Loggins was saying.

“Do you want us to smoke some more?” Purple One asked, interrupting the transmission, his Bolcavian accent thick. “We have only two more rounds apiece.”

There was a series of explosions roughly two kilometers behind Wang’s position. A full second too slow, he recognized the sound of rockets.

“Yes, Purple, Mustang guns are still shifting,” 1LT Loggins replied.

With good reason, Wang thought grimly, realizing that the rockets were counterbattery fire. The T-72s fired another volley. “Five, this is Six,” Wang said. “I am at A66 with Wyvern One and getting ready to move forward in about four mikes.”

“Black Six, Anvil Seven,” 1SG Lockwood stated. “I am en route to your location and about two minutes out. Please stand by.”

Don’t have to tell me twice, Wang thought, the pain in his leg throbbing.

“Sir, I need to get back to my platoon,” Wyvern One said insistently. As if on cue, A66’s back ramp lowered to reveal SGT McKlennon, TM Anvil’s headquarters NCO, with a hastily constructed manpack.

“Red taped hand mike is battalion, blue is company, sir!” McKlennon shouted.

“Go, Brigante,” Wang stated. “Thank you.”

“Roger, sir,” Brigante said. She turned and ran back forward toward her platoon, speaking urgently into her hand mike as she went. Wang turned to step into A66 and nearly fell as his right leg started to give. SGT McKlennon grabbed him, steadying Wang just as 1SG Lockwood walked up to the track.

“Sir, you OK?” 1SG Lockwood asked. SPC Brooks, TM Anvil’s medic, stepped around the NCO.

“I’m good, Top,” CPT Wang replied. “Just a little woozy.”

1SG Lockwood and SPC Brooks exchanged a look as the Soldier crouched down to look into CPT Wang’s eyes.

“Sir, what’s today’s date?” SPC Brooks asked, gently removing the hand mike from Wang’s hand.

“It’s ... it’s ...” CPT Wang started, then stopped. *Crap*, he thought.

“Sir, we’ve got the fight,” 1SG Lockwood said gently. “You trained us for this. Let’s get you taken care of.”

CPT Wang started to nod, then stopped as the movement caused a spike of pain. “Tell Mustang Six what happened and that Anvil 5 is taking the team,” Wang said.



“... Anvil 5 has assumed command, over.”

LTC Milner nearly slammed his fist down in anger before getting control of his emotions. Which was a good thing, as there weren’t many parts of his TC’s station that were forgiving. Mustang 6 was currently closing on collection point 25, a pair of Bolcavian BTR-80As behind him, followed by the TF headquarters. Mustang 6 was bringing up the rear of the column.

“Roger Anvil 7, what is your status?” he asked, fighting to keep his voice calm.

“Wyvern is currently breaching the obstacles on the bridge over PL ORANGE and is grappling the ford site to see if the intelligence reports on an obstacle were correct,” Anvil 7 replied.

“Roger, keep me updated,” Milner said.

I don't see how one could get anti-tank mines to stay in place with the Stamos as deep and fast as it is right now, Milner thought. But the last thing I want is to have a burning Bradley in the middle of a damn ford site with the crew drowning.

While processing enemy prisoners and the corpses of the infantry platoon TM Cobra had savaged the night before, intelligence personnel had found an obstacle map on an AGM leader.

CPT Robinson trained his folks well, LTC Milner thought.

Brigade (BDE) had taken the former Mustang-2 from Milner due to the BDE S-2 getting killed by a sniper. Still, even though Robinson was gone, the man's procedures had allowed TF Mustang to conduct intelligence operations without a hitch.

"Mustang Six—"

The interrupted transmission and sudden ominous silence, followed by the same on the BDE command net, told LTC Milner that electronic warfare (EW) was once again being employed against TF Mustang. LTC Milner swore as he swiveled to the blue force tracker (BFT) console.

Hell of a way to run a TF operation, he thought, starting to type. As suddenly as it had started, the jamming stopped in a tidal wave of multiple stations attempting to make contact.

"Break! Break! Break!" MAJ Fitch, his battalion XO, cut across the network. "This is Mustang Main, clear the net! TM Cobra, repeat your last."

"This is Cobra Six," CPT Hernandez reported. "We have completed breach operations. My Green element is across PL ORANGE and Red is crossing now. Expect crossing to be complete in one five mikes."

"Roger, Cobra," MAJ Fitch replied.

"Mustang Main, I monitored," LTC Milner stated. "Dagger, start your move."

"Mustang Main, Hammer One," 1LT Byrnes, the TF mortar PL began, "we are set."

The fact he's still alive validated his displacement plan, LTC Milner thought. He'd seen the smoke and dust from the rocket strikes at Hammer's initial positions. Although the BDE net's traffic indicated that the offending rocket battery had been subjected to immediate close air support (CAS) that would have been cold comfort if the mortars had the barrage land on their head.

"Sir! Sir!" his loader, SPC Coughlin, said, tapping him then pointing. LTC Milner turned to look at the direction the man was pointing and saw the driver for the lead M577 signaling him they'd reached the turnoff for the tactical operations center's (TOC) new position.

"Driver, stop," LTC Milner said, waving back. The M577 exited the road in a spray of mud, followed by the remaining command vehicles. The Bolcavian BTRs took up an overwatch position, their turrets sweeping the surrounding area as their occupants exited the vehicle.

"Mustang 6, Cobra 6, we are across OBJ NICKEL and are advancing north toward OBJ DIME."

Whoa, I need to slow Hernandez's roll, LTC Milner thought.

"Negative Cobra, establish a hasty defense until we get Anvil across PL ORANGE," LTC Milner stated. "Getting ready to conduct face-to-face with host nation forces at this time." There was a long pause, and LTC Milner could almost hear Hernandez sighing at his order.

"Acknowledged, Mustang 6," CPT Hernandez replied. "I am holding north of PL ORANGE and waiting on host-nation reinforcements."

"Mustang 6, Iron Six," COL Kendrick called on the BDE net.

Dang it, what now?

"Iron 6, Mustang 6, over," LTC Milner said.

"Need you to slow your advance," COL Kendrick stated. "Be advised Griffon—"

Before COL Kendrick could finish his sentence, there was an audible explosion that caused everyone near the Mustang Main to stop in their tracks. Looking directly west, LTC Milner saw a dirty brown cloud rising rapidly over the tree tops.

Oh my God, he thought. *They didn't ...*

“Mustang 6, stand by,” COL Kendrick barked. “Any Griffon element, this is Iron 6. SITREP.”

“Iron 6, Griffon 5, please stand by.”

That’s the British captain, LTC Milner thought. Fisk, that was his name.

“What the hell was that, sir?” SPC Coughlin asked, his eyes wide and voice panicked. LTC Milner turned to answer him and stopped as he recognized the dirty brown cloud had begun to resemble a mushroom.

“Easy Coughlin, that wasn’t a nuke,” LTC Milner said, hoping his voice was a lot more confident than he felt about the assessment. He heard MAJ Fitch issuing similar assurances on the battalion network to Sauron, the scout platoon having been much closer to the blast.

“Iron 6, Griffon 5,” CPT Fisk said after a moment. “My Animal element has been hit by some sort of large explosive. They were in contact with enemy dismounts and in pursuit when the device detonated. More information to follow.”

That’s not good, LTC Milner thought, looking at the BFT. TF Griffon’s Alpha company was at least 25 kilometers from his current position. For the explosion to have been audible at that distance, it had to have been truly massive.

We need to examine our protection plan, he thought worriedly.

“Sir! Sir!” he heard a voice shouting. Looking back up out of the cupola, he saw Mustang 63 had pulled alongside. MAJ Santiago, Mustang 3, was standing atop his turret shouting at him. The man pointed to the ground between their two vehicles, signaling that the two needed to talk on the ground.

“I’m hopping out, SGT Cropps,” LTC Milner stated. “Let Mustang 5 answer anything from BDE unless it’s for me specifically.”

“Roger, sir,” SGT Cropps said. LTC Milner got off of the turret, suddenly feeling every ache possible from the last few days.

“We have a problem, sir,” MAJ Santiago stated, drawing a raised eyebrow from LTC Milner. “Anvil has at least two KIA (killed in action) and one WIA (wounded in action) from the Bolcavians.”

“What?” LTC Milner asked.

“Anvil 6 got knocked into next week by the blast from one of the T-72s’ main guns,” MAJ Santiago replied. “One of the KIAs was from debris coming off the main gun shell that was fired over their position. The other one got killed by their trophy shooting down a Kornet.”

“I thought the initial report said Spigot,” LTC Milner said. The Kornet was a very dangerous weapon, both due to its accuracy and top attack capability.

“AGM was apparently saving those for tanks to show up,” Santiago stated. “Which they did. Anvil 5 says the T-72s are the only reason they got the breach established.”

“Shit,” LTC Milner said, rubbing his face.

“Are we going to report it to Iron 6?” MAJ Santiago asked.

LTC Milner understood exactly what his S-3 was asking. *I’m not sure I’m ready to have yet another 15-6*, he thought. *They haven’t impeded us yet, but they’re going to start adding up.*

As he was about to shake his head, LTC Milner saw the Mustang Soldiers putting the TOC together. Several of them were survivors from TM Badger who had been returned to duty despite their light wounds. The men were moving gingerly, many of them still bearing the bandages on their hands or hidden beneath their uniforms.

On the other hand, I think we’ve buried enough people in the last few days due to choosing to do the easier thing, LTC Milner admonished himself.

“Write up a report of what we know now,” LTC Milner said. “Also inform Iron 6 that I intend to put 1LT Borzkhov up for an award despite the fratricide.”

“Yes, sir,” MAJ Santiago said.

“LTC Milner!” a voice called in heavily accented English. LTC Milner turned to see a large bear of a man in a Bolshakov uniform walking toward him from the far woodland.

Where did they come from? Milner thought, looking around. He spotted the pair of sport utility vehicles (SUV) roughly 400 yards south along RTE EAGLE after a moment.

“Hey jackasses, anyone think maybe we should challenge people walking up to our perimeter!” MSG Wolf shouted from the other side of Mustang 63. The NCO strode toward the two approaching men, his M-4 not exactly pointed at them, but certainly in their general direction. Belatedly, LTC Milner heard the loaders on both tanks rotating their M240s around.

The Bolcavian officer wisely stopped in his tracks, looking cautiously at the weapons now pointed at him.

“LTC Milner!” he shouted again. “I was sent by LTC Sorokin to meet with you!”

Okay, he knows at least one correct name, LTC Milner thought. Oh well, I don't want to cause an incident.

“I'm LTC Milner,” he said, striding over to the man. “You are?”

“I am Major Andrukhovych Ivanov!” the man said, moving his hands very slowly in a wave. “I am commander of the Boyar Province militia!”

Sweet mercy, LTC Milner thought.

“I was sent here by LTC Sorokin,” the man continued, his accent thickening as his worry increased. “Mayor Galkin in car. We talk to you about Mayor Kovalchik, yes?”

Well, I guess some intel is better than none, LTC Milner thought bitterly. His request for assistance had fallen on deaf ears. There had been special operations forces (SOF) within the brigade combat team's (BCT's) sector north of PL ORANGE, but the teams had all either gone silent or been extracted in the face of active AGM operations.

A pair of UAV sorties had managed to briefly operate north of the BCT's frontline trace in TF Griffon and Spike's sectors, but both had been brought down by a man portable air defense system (MANPADS).

“I have—” LTC Milner began, only to be interrupted by the distant sound of tank guns. “I have troops in contact. Please give me 20 minutes.”

MAJ Ivanov nodded. “Of course, we will wait on your schedule. It will take time for my militia to get here in any case.” The man nodded at LTC Milner and MAJ Santiago, then returned to his vehicle.

“OK -3, remind me again about the militia?”

“It’s the host-nation’s equivalent of the National Guard, but without an overarching bureau,” Santiago said. “In this case, according to LTC Sorokin, the local boys were about to channel their inner Wolverines and take to the woods.”

LTC Milner winced at the *Red Dawn* reference. Probably would have gone about as well for the militia as that movie did for the good guys.

“Anyway, while the Arcanians vastly exaggerated some of the alleged Bolcavian atrocities, those things that did happen were usually due either to local militia or overzealous security folks,” Santiago concluded.

“So, you’re saying we should not use them?” LTC Milner asked.

“I’m saying I would be a lot more comfortable with regular forces if you can get them, sir,” Santiago replied, his tone earnest. “The last thing we want is for Zhodkiva to turn into a festering sore for us, especially if the Arcanians decide this is just the undercard rather than a main event.”

“Sir! Sir! Iron 6 is headed to our location!” MAJ Fitch yelled from the TOC. “ETA (estimated time of arrival) is 12 minutes.”

“That can’t be anything good for us,” MAJ Santiago muttered.

“Easy -3,” LTC Milner replied lowly. “He didn’t pull back on the bit when we pushed north.”

Santiago shrugged, but remained silent as they walked up to the Bolcavian SUV. It was only as they were closing the last few feet and MAJ Ivanov stepped out that LTC Milner had a terrifying thought.

If Ivanov was working for the AGM, we would both be very dead right now, Milner thought. The battalion’s two senior officers had walked right over to the SUV with nary any support other than perhaps their loaders covering them.

“On your left, sir,” MSG Wolf said, his voice just loud enough for LTC Milner to hear.

Thank goodness for the NCO Corps, Milner thought, forcing a smile to his face as he extended his hand toward Ivanov. *Saving officers from their own forgetfulness since 1775.*

The Bolcavian officer took Milner's hand in his own, shaking it enthusiastically as the passenger door opened. Milner noted that MSG Wolf had moved to where he could shoot any of the vehicle's three occupants with little trouble. Seeing Ivanov glance to his right, LTC Milner realized the Bolcavian had taken note also.

"Flaviu, this is LTC Milner," Ivanov said, waving the other man over from around the car. "LTC Milner, this is Mayor Galkin, of Voloslav."

Like Ivanov, Mayor Galkin was also a tall man. The similarities ended there, as Galkin's build was more giraffe than grizzly.

Moving hesitantly, as if he was afraid the Americans were going to shoot him at any moment, he came around the car to shake LTC Milner's hand. "It is a pleasure," Galkin said, his English halting.

"Flaviu, tell him what you told me and LTC Sorokin," Ivanov said. "Stop being such an old woman, the Americans are our friends!"

Galkin looked at the Bolcavian officer, then back at LTC Milner. "I have been in text contact with my cousin, Niculaie, this morning," Galkin said. LTC Milner had to strain to understand the man as he began speaking more quickly. "He texted me to say that the AGM is starting to leave Zhodkiva."

Well, that's interesting, LTC Milner thought. If it's true.

"How many people did the AGM have there?" MAJ Santiago asked.

Mayor Galkin seemed surprised by the question.

"You mean, you Americans did not know already?" he replied.

"We want to check our answer with yours," MSG Wolf said, not even missing a beat.

Ivanov seemed surprised that the NCO had interjected.

"It is always best to have two people confirm the same story," LTC Milner said, drawing the Bolcavians' attention back to him.

"Niculaie said there were maybe 20 or 30 AGM in town that he saw. He could not confirm how many for sure. He is worried about using his phone too often. They already took his most recent one away, but he kept a second one for emergencies."

LTC Milner nodded, letting Galkin continue talking.

“I want to avoid having anything bad happen in Zhodkiva,” Galkin said. “It is a beautiful town, with good people.”

Major Ivanov spat. “The Arcanians brought this upon us,” he muttered, gesturing at nothing in particular. “After this, we make sure that they cannot betray us again.”

That doesn't bode well for future peace, LTC Milner thought grimly. Ethnic strife had been a problem in the region for almost a hundred years. The current conflict was not going to help matters without outside intervention.

I can just see a documentary 30 years from now, Milner thought. *The Americans believed Operation RESOLUTE SHIELD would set the conditions for lasting peace. They were wrong.*

The scream of jet engines made everyone jump as a pair of Air Force F-16s streaked past just barely above the trees. The two fighters were headed south at high speed, and Milner had the feeling they were egressing from their target. A moment later, a pair of dark green Eurofighters, their roundels indicating they belonged to one of the other coalition members, also streaked past, but in a more southwesterly direction. The second aircraft was trailing either smoke or fuel from one of its wings, the vapor leaving a visible stream that hung in the air just above the trees.

Sometimes it's hard to recall there's a larger war on, Milner thought. The distant sound of rockets being fired from their southeast added an exclamation point to the thought.

“Sir,” MAJ Santiago said, nodding his head. LTC Milner looked up to see COL Kendrick striding toward him, the dozen members of his personal protection detachment (PPD) scanning the area around the brigade commander and the three officers accompanying him. Two he recognized even at a distance. Walking behind COL Kendrick was 1LT DeMaio, TF Mustang's liaison officer (LNO) to the Iron BDE's headquarters. On his left was LTC Sorokin, deputy commander of the 1st Battalion, 33rd Motorized Regiment. It was the fourth man that surprised him, however.

What is the DCG-S doing here? LTC Milner thought, referring to the Warpath Division's Deputy Commanding General-Support, Brigadier General O'Rourke.

“Gentlemen, we do not know what eyes are on us right now,” MSG Wolf cautioned, seeing the Bolcavians start to stiffen. “Let's not act as if the general is anyone other than another officer.”

The DCG-S looks like hell, LTC Milner thought, concerned. The tall, almost gaunt man looked even more worn down than usual, as if he had not slept in weeks. As the man got closer, LTC Milner realized the flag officer's gait was unnatural, as if he was slightly favoring one leg. As COL Kendrick and BG O'Rourke stopped in front of the vehicle, LTC Milner noticed the latter's body armor was ripped, with a visible gouge near the bottom of the plate insert.

One would think that's non-mission capable, LTC Milner thought with alarm. *What in the hell happened to him?*

"Good morning, sir," LTC Milner said, nodding in greeting to BG O'Rourke. "Welcome to Mustang Main."

"Good to see you again, Joe," BG O'Rourke replied.

"I'll get to the point, Joe, as I know you're in contact," COL Kendrick said. "I'm going to need to pull back on the bit a little. TF Griffon just got punched in the gut."

Well shit, LTC Milner thought, thinking back to the explosion.

Seeing the look that crossed LTC Milner's face, LTC Sorokin turned and said something in rapid Bolcavian to the other officers. They both nodded, and began to get into the vehicle.

"I would like a chance to talk to these gentlemen about what forces we can provide to you," LTC Sorokin said. "We will go back to my command post and return in an hour."

"Thank you, LTC Sorokin," LTC Milner said. The Bolcavian nodded, then clambered back into the SUV. Turning, LTC Milner pointed to the Mustang command track.

"We're still getting set up, but I'm pretty sure MAJ Fitch already has a map up," LTC Milner said.

COL Kendrick smiled and shook his head at that one.

"You know, I remember people giving your staff a lot of crap in the training meeting for putting 'analog drills' on the master plan," Iron 6 noted. "Not so many people laughing now."

"That's all MAJ Fitch, sir," LTC Milner replied. "I thought the man was insane as well. Much different war than the last one."

BG O'Rourke and COL Kendrick both nodded in grim agreement. The former gestured at his battle armor. "We certainly weren't expecting to get attacked at FOB (forward operating base) LOKI," he said. That comment caused LTC Milner to jerk his head around just as they were starting to reach the TOC.

"Joe's been in contact the last 24 hours," COL Kendrick observed. "The S-2 hasn't finished the update on FOB LOKI, so I had him restrict the information until the G-2 could fill in some gaps."

O'Rourke nodded as they stepped through the flap.

"TOC, att ..."

"At ease, at ease!" O'Rourke said, then turned to MSG Wolf.

"Warpath 6 has put out that as an OPSEC (operations security) measure the TOCs aren't to make any announcements or otherwise act differently when a senior officer arrives," O'Rourke said. "Believe it or not, the Bolcavians captured several directional microphones during their recent raids trying to stop the AGM. Assholes were trying to garner intel just by recording what was said in different FOBs."

"That's insane," LTC Milner observed.

"No, actually that's worked out for them," BG O'Rourke noted. He was about to explain further when MAJ Fitch strode up to the group. LTC Milner noted his XO had jotted down some hasty notes, while MAJ Santiago was hurriedly conferring with the battle lieutenant.

"Gentlemen, we've got the plans tent put up, if you'll follow me," Fitch stated. "Sorry we don't have any chairs available, but the map is up."

"Iron 3 will probably be issuing a FRAGO (fragmentary order) in the next 20 minutes," COL Kendrick stated while the group filed through Mustang command post. LTC Milner noted that the map had been updated to reflect both TM Anvil and TM Cobra across PL ORANGE. A look at the mapboard also told him that the TF had had three casualties die of wounds.

Will have to ask Fitch what happened there, LTC Milner thought grimly. Although, I suspect it was the fact MEDEVAC (medical evacuation) birds can't get forward with any reliability.

"Roger, sir," MAJ Santiago said, writing down a reminder in his green memo book. The group stopped in front of TF Mustang's map of the BDE sector.

“First, so you hear it straight from me, TF Griffon is now combat ineffective,” COL Kendrick said, his tone grim. “Griffon was in contact when the AGM detonated what the S-2 thinks was almost five tons of fertilizer and industrial chemicals in an agricultural complex.”

LTC Milner felt a burst of nausea at that news.

“The only comfort is that it was likely a premature detonation,” Kendrick continued. “The AGM killed about 20 of their own fighters who were trying to delay TF Griffon’s movement to PL ORANGE in the complex. But Griffon has at least 30 confirmed KIA and probably another 70 wounded.”

I need to get with the S-2 cell and then provide protection guidance, LTC Milner thought, aghast. Then review a mass casualty evacuation.

“So, with your left flank basically hanging open, I’m tempted to stop you on the other side of PL ORANGE until we can get some reinforcements up,” COL Kendrick said.

“Sir, with all due respect, I think that we have a limited window to get to OBJ DIME,” LTC Milner said. Kendrick’s mouth compressed in a thin line, and LTC Milner recognized he’d pushed about as far as he could even before the man spoke.

“I understand, Joe, I really do,” COL Kendrick said. “But your task force is pushing north into enemy territory with your scout platoon as your only flank protection to the west, and TF Strike is having supply problems.”

LTC Milner noted the pained look on BG O’Rourke’s face, but did not get a chance to ask questions as COL Kendrick continued. “I can’t support you with MEDEVAC because of TF Griffon and the aviation brigade’s attrition over the last three days. That being said, TF Cavalier will be attached to us as of 1500 today, and they’re going to conduct a forward passage of lines (FPOL) by 0900 tomorrow.”

“Roger, sir,” LTC Milner said.

“They made good time,” MAJ Fitch observed.

“Roads have been clear since the Bolcavian president imposed a 24/7 curfew,” BG O’Rourke observed. “Also the response to the FOB LOKI attack was rather strong.”

“FOB LOKI was attacked?” Fitch asked in shock, then added a belated, “Sir.”

I can understand his shock, LTC Milner thought. The division's supply lines ran a long 100 kilometers back to Slatinevo, Bolcavia's major seaport. FOB LOKI had been established five kilometers south of the town in order to serve as the transit point for the Warpath and Multinational Division's (MND's) heavy equipment and personnel.

"At 0630 yesterday, right around shift change, alleged AGM operatives conducted a coordinated strike using rocket launchers on timers, a UAS, and we believe some sort of cyber that made the commercial port's merchant fuel point begin spilling oil into the harbor," BG O'Rourke said.

Oh shit, LTC Milner thought.

"The rockets hit the AHA (ammo holding area) and one of the in-processing centers," O'Rourke continued. "This means the division only has one to two days of 120mm and 25mm Class V."

The flag officer gestured at his battle armor. "I was at FOB LOKI for the CFLCC (coalition forces land component commander) J-4 sync meeting. As you can see, I was lucky. Dozens of others were not, which leads to our next discussion: reconstitution."

BG O'Rourke looked to make sure there were no other Soldiers eavesdropping or otherwise paying attention, then continued. "The division will have to try to generate combat power out of hide," he said. "With the damage and losses at LOKI, we can't do a formal regeneration, so reorganization is going to have to happen within U.S. forces."

Reconstitution consists of two elements: reorganization and regeneration. These elements may be executed simultaneously as a degraded unit rebuilds combat power. **Reorganization** is the cross leveling of resources within a degraded unit to restore necessary combat effectiveness and is directed by the degraded unit's commander. **Regeneration** is more intensive and requires external resources, equipment, and personnel to regain lost combat power. Time is a strong contributing factor to what actions the commander chooses and to what level to execute.—CALL Handbook 20-01, *Corps and Division Planner's Guide to Reconstitution Operations*

“LTC Milner, my plan is to temporarily give you TACON (tactical control) of TF Griffon and Spike’s turret and hull repair mechanics,” COL Kendrick said. “Division is going to give you B/1-45 IN out of the support area security BN.”

Wait a second, LTC Milner thought. B/1-45 IN is a Stryker unit.

As if he was reading his subordinate’s mind, COL Kendrick continued. “I know they’re Strykers. No one is expecting you to have them go on a joyride up to the international border, but I’m sure between MAJ Santiago and you, the two of you will figure something out.”

“How long until B/1-45 IN gets here, sir?” MAJ Santiago asked.

LTC Milner had to suppress a smile at the man’s expression. *Always trying to think three steps ahead, Jorge.*

“Probably the same time as TF CAVALIER,” BG O’Rourke stated. “We have them pulling security along RTE TITANS to keep the AGM from interfering with CAVALIER’s movement.”

LTC Milner noted the DCG-S’s hand gesture indicating quotes around AGM. *It does seem like a bunch of ‘ethnic minorities’ are operating at a very high level of competency, he thought bitterly. I don’t think those rockets were manufactured in someone’s backyard either.*

“Sir, if we wait that long, we’re going to be missing a possible opportunity to get to Zhodkiva before the AGM can get their footing under them,” LTC Milner said. “I’ve got two company teams across the river and host-nation forces ready to help clear the town.”

BG O’Rourke and COL Kendrick shared a look.

“Joe, the old man isn’t inclined to assume any more risk,” COL Kendrick said. “Especially with the ammo problem. Also, the Arcanians have begun moving a division tactical group (DTG) toward the border, along with some fire support assets. 3rd BCT’s already had some incidents in their sector, including some mines mysteriously appearing along RTE DRAGONS.”

LTC Milner saw MAJ Santiago and MAJ Fitch share a look.

I really don’t want to find out what happens when an entire OSC (operational-strategic command) with reinforced fires tries to beat the crap out of one U.S. and one multinational division, LTC Milner thought. Especially as the Arcanians have openly stated they’ll take the gloves off if there are any attacks into their sovereign territory.

LTC Milner suddenly thought back to growing up in the late '80s as a dependent on various Air Force bases. His father had been a B-52 pilot with Strategic Air Command (SAC), and he was well aware of what it meant to be standing on a potential nuclear bullseye. While they did not have the throw weight of the old Soviet Bear, Arcania was a nuclear power.

"Now, we don't think Arcania wants to expand this conflict," BG O'Rourke said, attempting to tamp down the tension that COL Kendrick's statement had caused. "But on the other hand, if you'd told me six months ago that we'd all be standing here after having fought a major tank battle against 'volunteers,' I would have had you put in for an involuntary psych evaluation."

"Sir, Mayor Galkin has stated he has reliable information the AGM is abandoning Zhodkiva," LTC Milner stated. "My concern is that if we stop, we'll be digging them back out in two weeks."

Once more, BG O'Rourke and COL Kendrick shared a look.

I get the feeling this discussion has been had already with Warpath 6.

The division commander was not normally a cautious man, but the Iron Brigade's casualties as well as 3rd BCT's incidents were probably giving him pause.

TM Badger got beaten by the Junior Varsity, LTC Milner thought grimly. Albeit, with a lot of help from piss-poor planning by CPT Morris and my own failure to supervise him. That being said, I don't want to find out just how good those T-90s across the border are.

"Sir, I'd like to at least push Anvil up to PL RED, then Cobra up to the outskirts of Zhodkiva," LTC Milner pressed. "If I bring Dagger up on their eastern flank, I've at least got my entire task force on the other side in case someone gets frisky in Arcania."

"Joe, I'm ..." COL Kendrick started to say, then was cut off by BG O'Rourke.

"We'll talk to the old man, LTC Milner," BG O'Rourke said. "On my authority, you can push to RTE CONDOR as your limit of advance."

"Thank you, sir!" LTC Milner replied.

"Don't get too comfortable, though," O'Rourke said. "Warpath Six might shoot me and have you fall back to PL ORANGE. He's already muttering about not being the Douglas MacArthur to your Ned Almond."

MAJ Fitch let out a short bark of laughter before catching himself.

“Sir, I’m not sure I get the reference,” LTC Milner said, looking at his XO.

“MAJ Fitch can explain it later,” BG O’Rourke said. “Let’s hash out how we’re going to do your reconstitution.”

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

- 1) What were the differences between TM Cobra and TM Anvil's approach to far side security along PL ORANGE? Do you see any advantages or disadvantages to either? How would your unit approach a similar situation?
- 2) How was TM Anvil able to continue functioning while CPT Wang was incapacitated? Does your own unit have and regularly rehearse succession of command plans?
- 3) What level of injury is appropriate to remove a leader? Does this answer change based on position or type of injury?
- 4) Should a unit have a plan for processing battlefield intelligence? What elements should go into it? Do junior subordinates know the plan's aspects?
- 5) How do units mitigate fratricide risks with unfamiliar allied equipment? Do incidents resulting from ignorance of capabilities or risks qualify as fratricide according to doctrine or legal definition?
- 6) What is your unit's protection plan? Does it take into account improvised hazards, such as industrial or agricultural materials that facilitate the construction of high yield explosives?
- 7) Think about the conversation between COL Kendrick and LTC Milner. Just how strenuously should a subordinate commander press his superior regarding opportunity? How can a senior leader effectively communicate that there is no more room for discussion without impeding subordinates' future initiative?

CHAPTER 2

Regeneration and Preparation

“Sir ...”

CPT Hernandez jerked awake in his tank commander’s (TC) cupola, his combat vehicle crewman’s helmet (CVC) slightly askew. Sitting up, Team (TM) Cobra’s commander became aware that C66 had moved from its last position.

Crap, he thought, blinking rapidly and trying to reorient himself. TM Cobra had been midway through logistics package (LOGPAC) when he’d apparently drifted off. Now the forward support company’s (FSC) tankers and ammunition trucks were preparing to re-cross the Stamos to begin the long drive over to objective (OBJ) QUARTER.

If the security situation was less fluid, we would be able to conduct split operations, CPT Hernandez thought. It was simply easier to assign one platoon of Bradleys to conduct convoy security throughout the task force (TF) rear area than it was to have two tied down escorting the FSC’s vehicles.

“Holy crap, 1SG, I fell asleep,” Hernandez said, shaking his head.

He looked at his watch, then cursed. *OK, apparently I really fell asleep*, he thought, looking up at the mid-afternoon sky. Looking to his left, he saw C65 was also still at the refueling point, 1LT Dietze sprawled out on top of his turret.

“You didn’t miss much, sir,” 1SG Gegg replied drily. “Mustang 6 has had us hold until 1700. Green wanted to push some dismounts up further to get eyes on OBJ DIME, but apparently the division commander smacked Iron and Mustang 6’s hands so that was a no-go.”

CPT Hernandez rolled his eyes. “Sure, let’s give the AGM (Arcanian Guardian Militia) time to get their shit back together,” he muttered, then caught himself. 1SG Gegg gave him a disapproving look, then glanced at where SPC Augustine was trying too hard to show his inattention.

That’s how I know I’m tired, Hernandez thought. He prided himself on never showing his anger or disagreement with higher decisions to subordinates. It was always a good practice, but never more so than in matters of life or death.

“Cobra 6, Mustang 3, your push,” his headset crackled.

“Mustang 3, Cobra 6, over,” Hernandez replied, leaning up in the TC’s hatch to scan around. Looking to his southwest, he could see five approaching Humvees, the lead one sporting a flapping, dark guidon with a suspiciously familiar orange circle in its center.

Scout platoon, he thought, shaking his head. *Crazy idiots*. All four tracks had gunners up behind crew-served weapons, scanning suspiciously as they moved along Route (RTE) FALCON between the trees on either side.

If that’s half of Sauron, who the hell is guarding our right flank south of PL (phase line) ORANGE? Although Hernandez had not believed the scout platoon had been the most effective of guards, they certainly beat ‘thin air’ on the hierarchy of security measures.

“SGT Molnar, hop up here and take over the TC’s spot,” CPT Hernandez said. “I’m hopping down to meet Mustang 3.”

“Roger, sir!” Molnar replied as CPT Hernandez began clambering out of the tank. He slipped his pistol holster over his head, then grabbed his Kevlar and webbing. For a moment, Hernandez considered asking SPC Augustine to pass him the tank’s weapon.

Somewhere everyone’s favorite dead Prussian is laughing himself silly at us, Hernandez thought. *We have no idea what’s in front of us, to our east, or our west. Fog of war doesn’t begin to cover it, and I’m so uncomfortable, I’m thinking an M-4 makes a difference with two tanks, four Humvees, and Top’s 113 all here.*

Seeing through the fog of war. Against a near-peer opponent where numerous intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance sensor suites are potentially degraded, the burden falls upon the remaining capabilities within the maneuver task force to search for and see the enemy. Tactical momentum demands that maneuver formations accept risks when operating in the absence of unmanned aircraft system sensors by employing ground-based reconnaissance and surveillance. Every Soldier is a sensor.

“I wonder what has Mustang 3 all the way out here?” 1SG Gegg observed once Hernandez had jumped down off the tank.

“No idea, but I’m glad the Scout platoon finally decided to make its way north of PL ORANGE,” CPT Hernandez replied. “Now if only that MP platoon that’s supposed to be coming from BDE (brigade) would finally get here to secure the bridge.”

The three Sauron Humvees continued up RTE Falcon for another 200 meters, then turned off onto an access road into the woods. The middle two Humvees split off, heading toward C65 and C66. Mustang 3’s Humvee stopped roughly 50 yards from them, the driver turning to angle his front to the south so the gunner had a clear field of fire past C66. Once the vehicle’s engine was shut off, CPT Hernandez started walking forward.

“Good afternoon, sir,” CPT Hernandez said as MAJ Santiago hopped out of his vehicle. Santiago was carrying a folder, a mapboard, and several alcohol pens with him.

“Afternoon, Cobra 6,” Santiago replied, putting the map board on his Humvee’s hood. “We just got a FRAGO (fragmentary order) from brigade. Mustang 6 is going to brief Dagger and Anvil when he’s done talking to the Bolcavians. I’m getting you and the scouts.”

“Roger, sir,” CPT Hernandez said, pulling out his notebook. 1SG Gegg excused himself and began moving quickly back to C67.

I hope he’s going to get a map, Hernandez thought.

“First, here’s a list of graphic grids,” Santiago said, handing over two neatly printed series of locations. “Mustang Main will be pushing those over blue force tracker (BFT) in a few minutes, but that’s backup in case something goes wrong with the—”

MAJ Santiago was interrupted by the sound of artillery fire roughly five kilometers to their east. The barrage was short, at most maybe a handful of rounds that was over in under 30 seconds. Roughly two minutes after, there was the all too familiar sound of a rocket barrage firing from their north then passing overhead. This, in turn, initiated the sound of fire from several different locations to the south.

Always fun to know that you could die if any one person at several artillery factories wasn't paying attention that day, CPT Hernandez thought, watching as MAJ Santiago quickly snatched up a hand mike that Hernandez assumed was connected to the brigade net. For several tense minutes, Mustang 3 stood listening, his eyes narrowing.

“Sir, a map,” 1SG Gegg said, breaking Hernandez’s concentration. He saw that the 1SG had also grabbed 1LT Dietze, the executive officer (XO), looking slightly disoriented from having just woken up.

“I put out that you’ll be having a leader’s huddle in about 30 to 45 minutes,” 1SG Gegg said quietly. “Red and White are both set along PL CYAN.”

“Thanks, Top,” CPT Hernandez said, then turned to Dietze. “XO, you look like you need a cup of coffee.”

“Sorry sir, I was having this terrible dream that I was in the middle of a war zone,” Dietze replied, rubbing his eyes then taking a swig of water.

Well, guess he's awake enough, Hernandez thought with a smile.

He heard the sound of distant helicopter rotors and looked to the west. A four-ship of AH-64s was rushing northward, ducking and weaving in between the group of trees. *Some enemy artillery unit is about to have a bad ...* Hernandez didn’t get a chance to finish the thought before one of the Apaches simply exploded, the dirty brown puff of smoke hanging in mid-air. Two more white streaks passed near the flight leader, their warheads detonating just behind the wildly maneuvering helicopter.

“Holy shit!” 1LT Dietze said from behind Hernandez. The group watched as the three remaining helicopters all made their way back south. CPT Hernandez heard MAJ Santiago speaking urgently into the radio, presumably to either TM Anvil or Dagger.

“It looked like it was just west of CP 25, sir,” 1SG Gegg said, glancing at the map.

This is going to throw a monkey wrench in the planning process, Hernandez thought.

“We’ll update your orders on the BFT!” Santiago said, quickly opening his Humvee door to climb in.



“Sir! Sir! We have a downed aircraft in Anvil’s sector!”

1LT Eric Goldstein’s report caused LTC Milner to stop in mid-sentence. MAJ Fitch, Mayor Doyzhenko, LTC Sorokin, Major Ivanov, a handful of Bolcavian officers, and LTC Milner had all been standing around a terrain model of Zhodkiva when TF Mustang’s battle captain had interrupted.

“Where exactly?” MAJ Fitch asked, quickly glancing at his watch. LTC Milner once again realized Mustang 5 was very good about marking the exact time certain events happened. Looking at his own watch, LTC Milner noted that it was just slightly after 1400.

We’ve been stalled for five hours, he thought. I hope we don’t regret this later.

“Sir, I’ll handle the downed aircraft,” MAJ Fitch said, standing.

For a moment, LTC Milner thought about stopping his XO. *No, he’s right, my place is here with the Bolcavians, he thought. I have an S-3 and an XO for a reason.*

“LTC Milner, we can reschedule, no?” LTC Sorokin asked, seeing the interplay between Fitch and Milner.

“No, LTC Sorokin, we probably should not,” LTC Milner replied. “Every hour we wait just increases the odds that the AGM will move into Zhodkiva.”

That is, if they aren’t already there, LTC Milner thought. Despite his outward confidence, he had his doubts about only one source of intelligence within the city. Which is why we’re going to meet outside the city, he thought.

“I have texted my cousin and given him your instructions,” Mayor Doyzhenko said. “There are a pair of our burned out BMPs just south of town. He recommends this as the meeting place.”

LTC Milner nodded, even as his mind was going through the particulars of how to make this happen.

BDE approved the boundary change two hours ago that gave TF STRIKE responsibility for everything east of TM Cobra, LTC Milner thought. Mustang 3 is busy briefing CPT Hernandez on those changes now. Problem is, there is still a mechanized company that Iron 2 thinks is out there somewhere north of PL ORANGE.

LTC Milner tried not to imagine just how quickly Sauron's scout section would be destroyed if tanks and BMPs attempted to attack TM Cobra's eastern flank. TF Strike was only just reaching PL ORANGE, and the AGM had managed to destroy the two bridges in their sector.

"I can provide a platoon of my infantry to augment your scouts," LTC Sorokin said, as if reading his mind. "I have managed to reconsolidate after our losses."

"What assets?" LTC Milner asked.

"It would be our BTR-80s," Sorokin replied. "I would hesitate to send BMPs forward due to possible confusion."

LTC Milner inwardly winced at the reminder of TM Badger's fratricide incident.

"I think that will be a good solution," LTC Milner said. 1LT Mustaine, TF Mustang's plans officer, made a note.

"Major Ivanov, how long until your men can link up with CPT Hernandez?" LTC Milner asked. "I would like to be prepared to move forward as soon as our BCT gives us the go ahead."

"I can have vehicles here in another two hours," MAJ Ivanov said. "Some of the men are busy helping with processing civilian refugees to make sure there are no Arcanian spies within the ranks."

LTC Milner took the opportunity to look down at the map of Zhodkiva as he thought carefully about what he was about to say. *What they do with the civilians they are 'processing' is brigade's problem right now, he thought. However, once they are in my sector, it becomes my problem.*

"MAJ Ivanov, we must make sure your men understand the proper procedures for the treatment of civilians while they are operating within my sector," he said carefully.

To their credit, neither Ivanov nor Sorokin's expression changed. The junior Bolcavians standing behind the two men, however, all stiffened. One of their members began to redden, stepping forward as if he was going to speak before Sorokin's gaze stopped the man in his tracks.

"I assure you, LTC Milner, all of our forces, both militia and regulars, will act in accordance with our laws," LTC Sorokin replied.

That is precisely what I'm worried about! LTC Milner thought, even as he nodded.

“Is there anything else you need from us?” LTC Sorokin asked. “We must not tarry if we are to be ready when you’d like us to be.”

OK, I can tell I've caused a bone of contention, LTC Milner thought. *That was clumsy of me.*

“We will need to know what time your BTRs are moving forward to help our scout platoon with their mission,” LTC Milner said. Sorokin turned to look at one of his companions. LTC Milner noted it was the officer who had started to become angry at his words.

This day just keeps getting better and better, he thought.

“Will it be a guard or a screen?” LTC Sorokin asked. LTC Milner looked at him in surprise.

I forget that he did the Captain Career's Course at Fort Benning, Milner thought.

Sorokin, seeing the confusion on LTC Milner’s face, explained the reason for his question. “If it is a screen, I will merely send the BTRs,” he said. “However, if you are expecting those traitors in the militia to have armor and my men to fight them, I will also send a section of our anti-tank vehicles.”

Security operations provide information about the enemy and terrain and preserve the combat power of friendly forces. Security operations provide information about the size, composition, location, and direction of movement of enemy forces. Reaction time and maneuver space gained by information collected allows the main body commander to prepare for future operations or to deploy to engage the enemy. Security prevents the main body from surprise by the enemy, which allows the commander to preserve the combat power of maneuver forces and mass effects and combat power at the decisive point in time.—FM 3-98, *Reconnaissance and Security Operations*, page 6-1

Screen operations provide early warning to the main body. **Guard operations** prevent enemy observation and direct fire on the main body.—FM 3-98, *Reconnaissance and Security Operations*, page 6-4

LTC Milner considered LTC Sorokin's proposed course of action. "We're going to have to talk to brigade about this," he said. "I want to make sure we don't have a situation where TF STRIKE comes forward, sees your BTRs, and we have another incident."

LTC Sorokin nodded. "I agree, but at the moment I believe your larger issue is the company of AGM armor that our intelligence officers mutually believe is out there somewhere," he said.

"Sir, I've talked to CPT Robinson at BDE," 1LT Franklin, TF Mustang's S-2, said. "There are still no indicators as to where that unit could be."

This is the problem with SOF (special operations forces) now being engaged in 'Joint Targeting Operations vicinity PL BLACK,' as Brigadier General O'Rourke put it, LTC Milner thought.

CPT Robinson, the new Iron 2, had been TF Mustang's S-2 until a sniper attack on the BDE tactical operations center (TOC) necessitated a change. LTC Milner was confident that if there was any intelligence at all, his TF would have been the second folks to know about it after COL Kendrick.

So much to plan, LTC Milner thought. Taking a few moments, he looked again at the map. Need to figure out where to put NAIs (named areas of interest) and help the planners figure out decision points, he thought. TM Cobra has more than enough firepower to see off an enemy company, provided they are not in the midst of trying to approach OBJ DIME. Of course, that's precisely when the AGM will make the counterattack.

"We'll make sure to coordinate with BDE," LTC Milner said. "We will make it a guard mission, with NAIs that give us some hint of armor trying to take TM Cobra in the flank."

LTC Sorokin nodded as 1LT Mustaine hastily scribbled what LTC Milner was saying.

"We'll also plan some mortar and smoke targets just in case the AGM tries a dismounted—"

MAJ Fitch interrupted him by bursting into the plans tent. "Sir, Mustang 3 is in contact!"



One moment, MAJ Santiago had been following 1SG Gegg in C67 down RTE HAWK while talking on the radio with Mustang 5 and Anvil 5 about the latter's ongoing aircraft recovery operations. The next, MAJ Santiago, his driver, and gunner had all been treated to the horrifying spectacle of multiple rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) striking C67 in its flank, followed by a burst of heavy machinegun fire slamming into the side of their Humvee.

Now, less than five minutes into the ambush, Jorge Santiago was crouched behind the right front wheel of his Humvee as another burst of 12.7mm fire slammed into the vehicle's frame. SPC Wycott's body was slumped over Mustang 33's M2, its barrel still smoking from where the young Soldier had successfully engaged one of the two RPG teams. SPC Hearn was writhing on the ground next to MAJ Santiago, crying out in pain and looking at the stump where his right arm had been.

Shit. Shit. SHIT! MAJ Santiago thought, hand shaking as he fed another magazine into his M-4, chambered a round, then flicked his selector switch back to burst. He could hear voices shouting back and forth to each other in Arcanian over the sound of C67's ammunition popping off. The M113's rear ramp had dropped, allowing MAJ Santiago to see into the cauldron inside. At least two of TM Cobra's Soldiers had been caught inside. One had mercifully never regained consciousness. MAJ Santiago saw the other Soldier struggle to try to escape before being overcome by smoke and flames.

Beyond C67, Santiago saw two enemies run across the road. He quickly brought his M-4 up as both AGM militia attempted to seek cover behind the same tree. Their collision would have been almost comical if the situation had not been so deadly serious. Almost by rote, MAJ Santiago brought up his M-4 and fired at the militia member standing angrily over his comrade who had gotten knocked prone. The man dropped his AK and staggered to the side, going to one knee. MAJ Santiago never gave him a chance to recover, firing again and hitting the man with another one, perhaps two rounds.

Plunk!

MAJ Santiago turned toward the sound just as the grenade finished rolling off Mustang 33's hood. "Grenade!" he shouted, turning and starting to curl up in a ball just as the orb exploded.

There was a small pop as the grenade failed to fully detonate, the acrid smell of burning explosive swirling around him. MAJ Santiago started to roll to his feet when it felt as if a baseball bat slammed him in the center of his back followed by the feeling of a hot poker going through the side of his leg.

MAJ Santiago tried to take a breath, struggling against the wind being knocked out of him. More fire went over his head, telling him the first sensation had been body armor stopping a round, the second hitting him in the leg. For the first time, real fear began to slow his actions, and he rolled over to see the AGM militia man steadying his aim almost in slow motion.

I'm ... I'm about to—Santiago thought, right before the tree and the militiaman seemed to come apart in slow motion. The familiar *thump! thump! thump!* of at least two Bradley's autocannons followed by an accompanying sound of coaxial machine guns was the best sound that MAJ Santiago had ever heard. Time seemed to return to normal as the platoon of Bradleys continued to engage the AGM.

"Sir!" someone shouted from behind him. MAJ Santiago turned, his leg screaming in agony as he did so. He looked down to see his thigh had a bullet hole in it, the blood staining his uniform. Five Soldiers were moving toward him, and he recognized 1LT Malik, the leader of Green Platoon from TM Cobra.

"Corporal Scarborough, go search those men!" 1LT Malik ordered, then turned back toward his Bradley. "Medic!"

There was a muffled *whump* as something cooked off inside of C67. MAJ Santiago jerked sideways, at which point his ribs reminded him that his armor had saved his life. Reaching up to his webbing, Santiago grabbed the first aid pouch.

"Sir! Sir! We got you," SPC Hill, TM Cobra's medic said, appearing beside him as if by magic.

"Get SPC Hearn's," MAJ Santiago said, gesturing toward his gunner. He stopped, Hearn's pallor and staring eyes clearly indicating he was beyond SPC Hill's help.

"Sir, you're going to be okay," SPC Hill said after a momentary pause. "Let's just get you leaned back."

As SPC Hill leaned him back, MAJ Santiago nearly turned to call to 1LT Malik. Belatedly, he realized the platoon leader had other issues, namely making sure the area was secure. As Malik spoke into his radio, MAJ Santiago realized the engagement had been far worse for TF Mustang than he realized.

“SPC Hill, get me over to the vehicle,” MAJ Santiago said.

“Sir, I have to stop this bleeding,” SPC Hill replied, working feverishly. “You’re not going to be able to do a damn thing if you bleed to death.”

MAJ Santiago started to argue, then realized that he was indeed starting to exhibit signs of major blood loss.

It doesn’t matter, word has to get back to Main, he thought. He felt a prick in his arm as SPC Hill administered morphine.

“1LT Malik!” he called. The platoon leader turned back toward the S-3.

“Yes, sir?”

“You need to inform Cobra 6 that Cobra 7 is KIA (killed in action),” MAJ Santiago said, suddenly feeling out of breath. “Mustang 7 as well.”

“Sir, I already sent it up,” 1LT Malik said, glancing toward the burning C67. There was another muffled explosion as a grenade cooked off within the M113. Flaming debris landed just beside SPC Hill.

“Sir, I need help moving MAJ Santiago,” SPC Hill said, glancing worriedly at the burning vehicle.

“Ma ... make sure you Z out the radios,” MAJ Santiago observed.

1LT Malik looked inside Mustang 33, then back at MAJ Santiago.

“Sir, your radio is trashed,” the platoon leader observed. “I don’t think anyone is getting a fill out of it.”



“Joe, you’re staying stopped until morning,” COL Kendrick said as he stepped out of his Humvee at Mustang Main.

“Roger, sir,” LTC Milner replied, recognizing how lost his voice sounded.

It had been three long hours since LTC Milner had finished reporting the casualties from Mustang 3's ambush to Iron Main. It spoke volumes to LTC Milner's level of shock that the order didn't even cause him consternation. He was still trying to wrap his mind about the afternoon's events.

Holy smokes, he thought, rubbing his face. *What a day.*

CSM Al Vraciu, Mustang 7, had not only been his right arm, but a friend. His wife, Lucy, and Kathryn Vraciu had bonded over a mutual love of vineyards and British cooking shows. The last letter LTC Milner had received had been regarding a Family Readiness Group (FRG) function that was scheduled for the following day.

Unlike Iraq, I have no way to tell Lucy what's coming, LTC Milner thought.

"LTC Milner," COL Kendrick said, his voice strong.

Belatedly, LTC Milner realized he'd missed what Iron 6 had said. "Sorry, sir," he stated.

COL Kendrick nodded, regarding him with a kind expression. "LTC Milner, it's not your fault what happened," he said. "I have the utmost confidence in your ability. I wanted to make that clear to you before we talked about anything else."

LTC Milner felt a weight shift off his shoulders he didn't even realize had been there. "Thank you, sir," he replied.

"I'm stopping you only so you can get your leadership team together and figure out how to cross level," COL Kendrick said. "What is your plan to replace CSM Vraciu?"

I hadn't really figured that out, LTC Milner thought, angry at himself for not being able to push through this grief. But a half-baked plan beats nothing.

"Sir, I'd like to shift my ops sergeant major, MSG Wolf, to take over as Mustang 7," LTC Milner said. "SFC O'Hare, the Cobra Mike Golf, can act as 1SG until we get a replacement."

COL Kendrick nodded.

"I'll be honest, Joe, the personnel pipeline is not the greatest with all the other casualties," Iron 6 replied. "We might have to do some shuffling around. Iron 7 had recommended 1SG Young out of Dagger to shift over to TF Strike—"

“Sir?” LTC Milner interrupted, shocked.

“Strike 7 had a heart attack this morning,” COL Kendrick said. “He’s been evacuated to the rear and will likely be okay. I was going to approach you and Mustang 7 about ISG Young’s transfer when your initial report came in. Now, I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“Sir, ISG Young was selected to go to the Sergeants Major Academy when this whole mess started,” LTC Milner said. “My first choice for transfer would be MSG Wolf, but for obvious reasons I’d like to keep him here as my new Mustang 7.”

COL Kendrick was silent for a few moments, clearly thinking through different factors.

“How hurt is CPT Wang?” he asked. “I don’t want to basically decapitate your TM Anvil.”

“Sir, CPT Wang has only a mild concussion,” LTC Milner said. “Doc checked him out, plus 1LT Loggins is a strong leader. ISG Young came down on the last E-9 list, and Iron 7 clearly thinks that TF Strike could use his leadership.”

“I picked up on that also,” COL Kendrick replied. “Very well, we’ll send him over and keep Wang with TM Anvil.”

“Thank you, sir,” LTC Milner said. “I hope I don’t regret this in 48 hours.”

“Speaking of 48 hours, The BDE Surgeon tells me that Jorge Santiago is wanting to come back to the fight,” COL Kendrick said. “My first inclination was to say no, as he lost a lot of blood. Then the division informed me that they have no one else to send for at least 48 hours.”

He wasn’t kidding when he said the personnel resupply is problematic, LTC Milner thought. Before he could inquire as to why, COL Kendrick continued talking. “Warpath 6 is trying to plan for a defense as well as continue to push for the international border,” he stated. “This is not to go further, but after the Apache shoot down this morning, the CFLCC (coalition forces land component commander) and CFACC (combined force air component commander) have requested permission to strike air defense artillery (ADA) units across the international border. Long story short, the SECDEF (Secretary of Defense) agreed and that’s likely going to happen tonight.”

About damn time, LTC Milner thought, even as he foresaw what COL Kendrick was going to say next. The AGM's mobile ADA had been emplacing and displacing across PL BLACK almost at will, which was a large part of the reason the Iron BDE was operating at a severe intelligence deficit.

"That is going to go either well or poorly," COL Kendrick allowed, looking north. "There's at least one Arcanian division heading this direction as we alluded to earlier. For all Warpath and the CFLCC knows, there could actually be two or even a full OSC (operational-strategic command)."

LTC Milner nodded his understanding as COL Kendrick continued. "If the Arcanians do become full participants in the conflict, my intent is to hold south of PL ORANGE," he said. "But until then, I'll be damned if I'm giving them these bridges back just because life might get interesting."

"Sir, should I issue a WARNO (warning order) to that effect?" LTC Milner asked.

COL Kendrick seemed to consider his question. "No," he replied. "But you should tell MAJ Fitch. If you're willing to assume the risk, I'll send MAJ Santiago back."

"Sir, MAJ Santiago is a capable officer and I trust his assessment of how he physically feels," LTC Milner said. "If he can get into Mustang 63, he can stay."

"B/1-45 IN should be here at 0700 tomorrow," COL Kendrick said. "CPT Litvak has been told to report to you immediately upon their arrival."

"Roger, sir," LTC Milner said.

"Take care of yourself, Joe," COL Kendrick said somberly. "I've been writing letters all morning. I don't need to add one to Lucy on top of it."

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

- 1) Does your unit have a leader rest plan built into its SOP? How does a unit's leadership prepare for and enforce a rest plan?
- 2) How can commanders conduct security operations at their level? Is reconnaissance and security strictly the responsibility of an organization's cavalry and scout assets? Does the BCT have any assets that a TF can request in order to reduce the "fog of war?"
- 3) What is the role of graphics in shaping military planning? Does your unit SOP address the use of temporary graphics? How does it address transferring graphics in a degraded environment?
- 4) Consider how LTC Milner and MAJ Fitch handled the downed aircraft. How does a TF prepare for surprising events? What steps can key leaders take to prevent incidents from completely disrupting the planning process?
- 5) How will units deal with downed aircraft in LSCO?
- 6) Because not every host nation will have a "career course graduate," in what ways can a TF share information with its allies? What planning complications does integrating a host-nation force impart onto a battalion? Do you foresee complications in having an integrated screen line on TF Mustang's eastern flank?
- 7) LTC Milner was interrupted in the middle of providing guidance to 1LT Mustaine. What other planning factors or guidance do you think that he should have been prepared to mention?
- 8) How should a battalion handle senior leader movement and security? How much risk was Mustang 3 assuming by moving along with the scouts and CSM? How does a task force balance the need to secure the main CP with leaders' need to conduct battlefield circulation in their vehicles?
- 9) Large-scale combat operations (LSCO) will likely see degraded communications' capabilities with home station. How is your unit FRG prepared to support and facilitate casualty notification processes? Do your FRG leaders have a plan to deal with the death of a senior leader or multiple casualties within the battalion? What coordination steps do you believe the rear detachment needs to make with home station agencies for casualty assistance and family support?

10) What roles do senior leaders have in casualty notification during a LSCO? Is it reasonable to expect a battalion's leadership to write individual letters to each casualty's next of kin, given the speed and lethality of modern combat?

CHAPTER 3

Stopped On a Dime

CPT Wang stood 200 yards north of objective (OBJ) QUARTER and hoped that his head would stop pounding. *I may have fibbed a bit to Doc about my symptoms*, he thought. *I'm just glad the blurriness went away*. While he would get moments of vertigo if he jerked his head too sharply, the sensation of a raging monster pounding on the inside of his skull was the most prominent reminder of his brush with death the previous day.

“Team (TM) Bandito sure is taking their time, sir,” 1LT Loggins stated, looking at his watch. “I mean, there’s only a whole Task Force (TF) movement hinging on them getting here.”

Wang turned slowly to look at his executive officer (XO). “They just marched all the way up here from the SPOD (sea port of debarkation),” he reminded 1LT Loggins. “You remember that trip from when we got here, right?”

Loggins nodded, his expression pained. “I’ve never seen so many apparently suicidal car drivers,” he noted. “No matter how many warnings we broadcast or the local law enforcement put out, people kept approaching our convoys at high speed.”

“Now add in the fact that, despite a curfew, people are still driving,” Wang continued. “From what Mustang 5 said, TM Bandito also had a couple of incidents during the march.”

“Sir?”

“Apparently they lit up a family of five that didn’t realize driving at high speed toward an MGS (mobile gun system) platoon with high beams on was not a good idea,” Wang said.

“Holy shit!” Loggins said. He looked aghast as his company commander continued.

“That wasn’t the half of it,” Wang continued. “Apparently the Bolcavian militia pulled the father out of the driver’s seat and shot him in front of his kids.”

“So, yeah, I’m going to spot the company being late,” Wang stated wryly. “They weren’t even supposed to make it to our battalion area until 0900 originally, so they’re still almost an hour ahead of schedule.”

“I can only imagine Cobra 6 is chomping at the bit,” Loggins said.

“Cobra 6 is probably just ticked they’re not already at PL (phase line) RED,” Wang observed.

The sound of diesel engines from the south caused both men to stop and turn to look back across the Stamos. Exiting the woodline on the far side, an MGS came into view, its 105-mm gun scanning left and right as it moved down Route (RTE) OWL. Judging from the stylized outlaw on the wheeled-vehicle’s left front, Wang assumed that was TM Bandito’s integral MGS platoon and not the additional one that had been cross attached.

“Well XO, give all the platoons a 20-minute warning for movement,” CPT Wang said.

“Do you want to do a last huddle?” Loggins asked.

“No,” CPT Wang replied. “We don’t want to be caught on the ground jaw jacking if task force tells us to move.”

“Roger,” Loggins said. “I’ll go pass the word.”

As his XO moved off toward A65, Wang watched TM Bandito head toward the bridge. One platoon of the Strykers stopped on the south side of OBJ QUARTER, fanning out to 1st Platoon’s flanks. As infantry dismounted from the Strykers’ rear doors, Wang could see black smoke puffing from the Strykers as they began raising their ramps.

Just like we planned it, Wang thought. He wished that he’d had a chance to conduct a full rehearsal and coordination with CPT Litvak, TM Bandito’s commander, prior to handing over responsibility for OBJ QUARTER. Instead, the two had done a hurried series of messages via blue force tracker (BFT). *Doctrine and common terminology is a wonderful thing.*

The next unit to deploy was an MGS platoon. Crossing the bridge, the trio of MGS vehicles moved to Wang’s east, near where the Bolcavian platoon of T-72s were arrayed with their turrets oriented toward OBJ DIME. With the bridge destroyed where RTE CONDOR crossed PL ORANGE, the primary threat of mechanized movement was along that path. Wang noted that the MGS platoon, unlike their Bolcavian counterparts, remained well within the woodline.

That will be interesting if a counterattack comes from that direction, Wang thought. The Bolcavian T-72s had tried to find positions that maximized their standoff distance given the relatively flat terrain between OBJ QUARTER and OBJ DIME. Although Wang could not quite see Zhodkiva's water tower from where he was standing, the town was not that far away. The open ground lent itself to military operations, as shown by the dozen or so knocked out Bolcavian and Arcanian Guardian Militia (AGM) vehicles on the gravel road that leads east toward the city. *I wonder if there's still live ammo to cross level for the T-72s?* thought Wang.

"CPT Wang?"

CPT Wang turned around at hearing his name and instantly regretted it. His vision went temporarily blurry, and sharp pain lanced through his skull. *Dammit,* he thought, fighting the urge to vomit from the nausea.

"Yes?" he asked, trying to bluff his way through the blurry vision. It was only after a moment that he realized the tall, female captain in front of him was the person who'd spoken. Like Wang, her features were broken up by applied camouflage, and her helmet's outline was similarly disguised.

"CPT Litvak," she continued, looking at him quizzically. "Are you OK?"

"I-I'm fine, CPT Litvak," Wang said. "Just a little dizzy."

"I've passed the word up to LTC Milner that we are set," CPT Litvak said.

"Looking at the scheme of maneuver, I came over to ask if you wanted to be prepared to take my 2nd Platoon?"

"Wait, what?" CPT Wang asked, not sure if the blow to his head had caused a hallucination. *What commander gives up combat power?*

"LTC Milner briefed me on the plan for TM Anvil to move east and cordon off the town if anything happens," CPT Litvak replied. "Given your losses, I asked him if he wanted me to be prepared to detach a platoon to you if that occurred."

CPT Wang considered the question.

"I've been reinforced with an extra MGS platoon," CPT Litvak said, pointing back across the river to where a second trio of the wheeled guns was seeking fighting positions. "I'd rather that there be more combat power at the point of attack than try to hold onto everything."

Already a better team player than CPT Morris was, CPT Wang thought uncharitably. He was still mulling over the decision when a 1LT and a noncommissioned officer (NCO) CPT Wang thought he might recognize from his prior service walked up.

“This is my XO, 1LT Robert Pattle,” Litvak said by way of introduction. “And 1SG William McNair.”

CPT Wang did a double take as he looked at 1SG McNair, causing the senior NCO to start smiling as well.

“I thought you got out of the Army!” CPT Wang said, extending his hand to shake that of his former fellow squad leader. A slight shadow crossed McNair’s face even as he returned the handshake. *Man could still crush a cinderblock with that grip,* Wang thought.

“Someone decided the problem wasn’t the Army,” McNair said in return. “Where’s your 1SG? I want to talk to him about TF medical evacuation (MEDEVAC) procedures if he’s got the time.”

“1SG Lockwood is with his track,” CPT Wang said, gesturing. He noted Litvak and Pattle giving both men bemused looks. “He can give you a copy of our standard operating procedure (SOP). Not that it may do all that much good with MEDEVAC choppers having to stay 40 kilometers south of PL YELLOW after yesterday.”

The Bandito command team looked at him blankly.

“We had a downed helicopter yesterday,” CPT Wang explained. “Then Mustang 3 got ambushed trying to come to the crash site.”

“We heard about the ambush,” CPT Litvak said, looking around concerned. “Not the helicopter.”

“Quite frankly, nothing we could do for the Apache crew,” CPT Wang said, gesturing generally southeast. “I saw the whole thing happen. They probably didn’t even know what hit them, and the missiles that missed were almost like artillery.”

CPT Wang pointed upwards. “Glad it didn’t happen right over our heads.”

“Sir! Cobra is starting to move!” 1LT Dietze called.

When applying the Army's core competencies, Army leaders are guided by the mission command philosophy—the exercise of authority and direction by the commander using mission orders to enable disciplined initiative within the commander's intent to empower agile and adaptive leaders in the conduct of unified land operations. The ability of Army forces to combine core competencies into a fluid mix of offensive, defensive, and stability operations depends on a philosophy of command that emphasizes broad mission-type orders, individual initiative within the commander's intent, and leaders who can anticipate and adapt quickly to changing conditions.—ADP 3-0, *Operations*, 31 JUL 2019

Time to display some initiative, CPT Wang thought. "I'll take the platoon you're offering," he said to CPT Litvak.

"Five, go grab 1LT Rieger, tell him to come to my position," CPT Litvak ordered.

Pattle nodded, moving quickly back toward the bridge. 1SG McNair hustled off to catch up with 1SG Lockwood.

As he waited for the Bandito platoon leader to join him, CPT Wang turned and looked toward the east. *Awfully quiet over that way*, he thought, looking at his watch.



Yesaul Feliks Vasileyev, AGM, had a problem. It had been almost a full day since the sounds of indirect and direct fire to his south and southwest had ceased. He had fully expected the Americans and his countrymen to appear the day before. It had been a pleasant shock when he'd had an additional 12 hours to further prepare his plan for the defense of Zhodkiva.

I am buying time, nothing more, he thought, looking at his watch. It was slightly after 0900. *Hopefully what we are about to do will buy a better end for this conflict*.

His scouts' reports of tanks and Bradley fighting vehicles in the treeline just over two kilometers south of Zhodkiva meant the Americans had finally begun to press forward. That the vehicles had not begun firing on his forces meant that, as the Arcanians had promised, their countermeasures against optical and thermal sights had worked.

Blankets, he thought. *We are betting our lives on blankets.* The Arcanians had pointed out that the cloth was not perfect, and that they still needed to take precautions from giving away visual cues. However, it would appear that aggressive patrolling within town and the air defense artillery's exploits from their enclaves just south of the border had combined to keep his opponents blind to Vasileyev's intentions.

"Sonya," he said, speaking to his deputy, "go tell the others that the Americans will be here within the half hour. It would appear Fyodorov's cohort is truly no more."

The older woman's mouth set in a hard line as she nodded. Yesaul Fyodorov's 100 men had fought bravely over the last few days against the oncoming Americans. However, with Fyodorov's assumed death defending the bridges, his unit had ceased doing battle as a cohesive force and now fought as disjointed groups wreaking havoc wherever they could.

It was foolish of Fyodorov to try to fight the Americans south of the river, Feliks thought sadly. *We could have done so much more together in this city.* From what Fyodorov's deputy had told Feliks the previous night, half of the cohort had died along with their commander the night the Americans had reached the Stamos. A couple dozen more had either been slain or fled defending the western bridge and fording site. It was only when the Americans had foiled an ambush of a personnel carrier and several of their Humvees that the man had finally acknowledged defeat and fled back to Zhodkiva.

Fighting the Americans in the open is idiocy, Feliks thought. *He was lucky to make it ba—*

Heavy footfalls ran across the floor above him, interrupting his thoughts. Feliks' hand reflexively gripped his AK-47 as he looked worriedly toward the door leading down into his command post. It flung open, revealing a woman in her mid-20s holding a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG).

"The mayor has made direct contact with the Americans again," Katenka Mikhailov, his niece and the cohort's intelligence officer, reported breathlessly. "It is as you expected; they will be sending in the oppressor forces to talk with him along with an American company commander."

Feliks nodded, feeling his throat go dry. For an instant, he forgot all about the rancid stench of the disabled sewage plant that permeated the town, the civilians strategically herded into certain buildings, or the stifling heat in the basement.

Our plan should work, he thought, fighting back his fear.

“Are the cameras in place and ready to activate?” he asked aloud.

Despite the moment’s danger, Katenka still favored her uncle with an exasperated eye roll. “Yes, the cameras are still in place,” she said. “Yes, I have placed the batteries with them so that they will run the whole time.”

Feliks shook his head.

“If your mother was he—”

“If mother was here, she would be screaming at both of us,” Katenka said. “Then again, if she were here, we probably would not be.”

She has a point, Feliks thought. But the Securitate saw fit to kill her without a trial. Like Feliks, Stephan Mikhailov had been a staunch believer in Arcanian separatism. Unlike Feliks, Stephan had sought the path to independence through political activism rather than military means, which was why he’d been available for the Securitate to attempt “arresting” by virtue of storming his house in the middle of the night.

For every one of us you killed, you made 10 more of us, Feliks thought, gripping his rifle tighter. The distant sound of truck engines interrupted his thoughts.

“Go, release the mayor’s family,” Feliks said. “Then you will go to the shelter.”

“Uncle ...” Katenka began to argue.

“I am not having a discussion, Katenka,” Feliks said. “The Securitate will retaliate against anyone they capture for our ruse.”

“Then why are we releasing the mayor’s family?” Katenka argued.

“Because we must have the world understand that we are not the monsters, but it is the government,” Feliks said. “Just as we will teach the Americans that they should mind their own business.”

The officer stood up and held out his hand for his niece’s rocket launcher. Reluctantly, the young woman handed it over.

“Go get changed,” he said. With tears in her eyes, Katenka embraced him, then went to follow her uncle’s orders.

Commanders accept risks and seek opportunities to create and maintain the conditions necessary to seize, retain, and exploit the initiative and achieve decisive results. During execution, opportunities are fleeting. The surest means to create opportunity is to accept risk while minimizing hazards to friendly forces. A good operational approach considers risk and uncertainty equally with friction and chance. The final plans and orders then provide the flexibility commanders need to facilitate subordinate initiative and take advantage of opportunity in a highly competitive and dynamic environment throughout the conduct of unified land operations.—ADP 3-0, *Operations*, 31 JUL 2019, pages 2-12



“Roger Mustang Main, I understand that we will meet the delegation 600 meters south of OBJ DIME instead of one kilometer,” CPT Hernandez said as C66 slid into the place behind the last of the Bolcavian lorries. “Expected time of arrival is in one zero mikes.” (See Figure 3-1.)

Looking across C66’s turret front, CPT Hernandez made eye contact with the Bolcavian NCO riding in the trail lorry’s rear. The soldier was regarding C66 with some worry, as if he was concerned that the tank’s main gun would accidentally go off and send the entire truck into the afterlife.

“Power!” Hernandez said, grabbing the TC’s override. He swung the tank’s main gun further to the left, seeing palpable relief in the Bolcavian’s expression.

“Just trying to avoid scaring our friends in front of us,” Hernandez said by way of explanation.

Poor guy looks like he’s barely 19, Hernandez thought. But he’s a platoon sergeant. Either I’m getting old or they’ve had some serious attrition.

As Hernandez recalled Mustang 2’s briefings back at home station, he considered what “20 casualties a week” probably looked like. *I guess that would lead to a lot of battlefield promotions, he thought grimly. That’s a platoon every two weeks.*

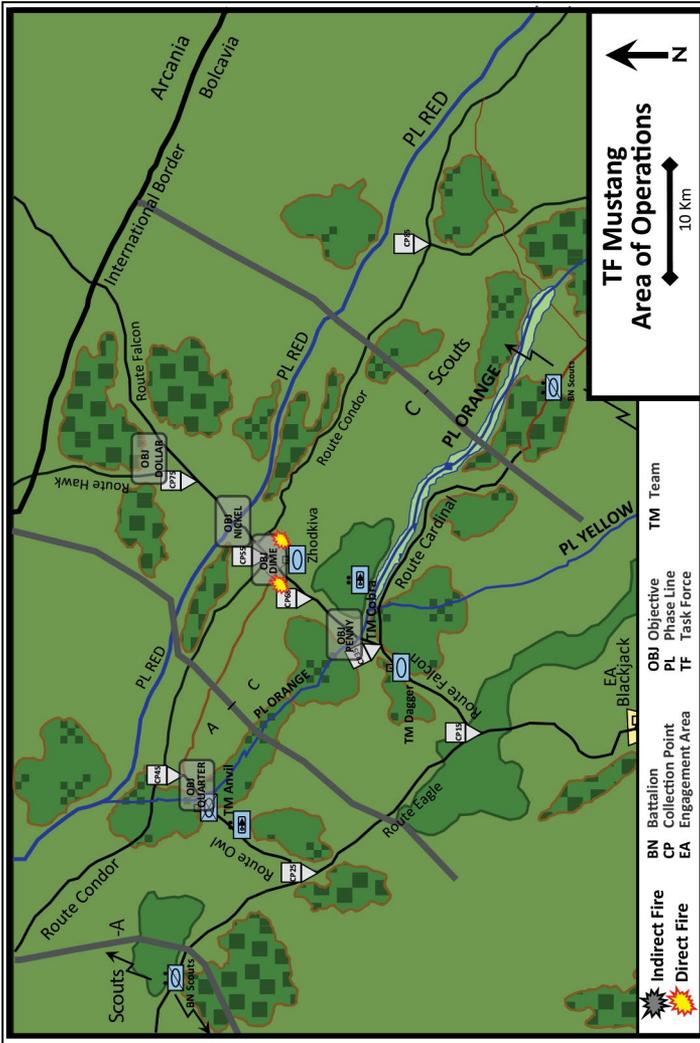


Figure 3-1. Team Cobra at OBJ DIME

“Black Six, Red One,” 2LT Depaul’s voice crackled in his headphones. “Set at PL FANTA.”

Hernandez looked at his company graphics to confirm Red’s location at the very edge of the treeline. “Roger, Red One,” he replied. “Green, what’s your status?”

“I will be set at PL FANTA in approximately five minutes, Black 6,” 1LT Malik replied. “I have dismounts out and advancing, time now.”

“Roger, Green One,” Hernandez replied. “White, let’s slow it down a little bit to give everyone time to get into position.”

I really wish the Bolcavians hadn’t been late, Hernandez thought. Well, them and the Strykers.

“Understood, Black 6,” 2LT Rogerson said from the front of the column.

A shift in the wind wafted a foul smell into Hernandez’s nostrils. Pursing his lips, he looked around.

“What is that, sir?” SPC Augustine asked.

“No idea,” Hernandez replied, saliva filling his mouth. Then it struck him. “Black Five, Black Six,” he said. “Inform higher that we’ve got pretty clear evidence the sewage plant isn’t working.”

“Roger,” 1LT Dietze replied.

“Six, this is Seven,” SFC O’Hare asked on the company net. “Do we need to start putting together a SWET (sewage, water, electricity, and trash) plan?”

Hernandez shook his head as he fought down a surge of emotion at hearing O’Hare’s voice rather than 1SG Gegg’s. Gaining control of himself, he considered the question. SWET was a major headache, but the town of 5,000 was probably going to need it.

“Might as well start one, Top,” Hernandez replied as C66 meandered around the final curve within the woods south of OBJ DIME. He glanced to his left and saw C13 roughly 200 yards away, the tank roughly 50 meters within the trees. C13’s TC had walked to the back of the tank and was busy relieving himself off the back deck.

It has been a long morning, Hernandez thought to himself, suddenly considering his own bladder. *When this meeting's done.*

Looking toward Zhodkiva, he watched as C23 passed a turned-over red minivan on the side of the road. The vehicle's side was pushed in as if a giant had slapped it, its windshield pockmarked by what looked like several large fragments. Just beyond the vehicle, a pair of burnt out BMP-2s, their turrets pointed north, decorated the open field.

Sometimes it's easy to forget that the Bolcavians put up a fight from PL BLACK to PL ORANGE. It's only been a week.

"Black Six, I've got vehicles leaving town," 2LT Rogerson said. "Two small sedans."

"Roger, White, get off the road and stand by," Hernandez said. "I'm coming forward to your position." Quickly scanning left and right, Hernandez made a quick decision.

"Linden, go to the left of that minivan," Hernandez barked. "Get us past these trucks."

"Roger!" SPC Linden, C66's driver, replied. A moment later the tank lurched forward as he took the Abrams off the road and accelerated in a rooster tail of soft earth. Turning, Hernandez saw the lead Bolcavian truck coming to a stop, its soldiers hurriedly dismounting. CPT Groshev began barking orders to his men, motioning for them to get off the road as 2nd Platoon began assuming overwatch positions.

"Careful Linden, watch out for the dism—"

CPT Hernandez never got to finish his sentence. With a mighty roar, the 400 pounds of ball bearings, roofing nails, and plastic explosive packed into the minivan's roof exploded in a sphere of black and orange fury. CPT Groshev, his 1SG, his executive officer, and a dozen of his men simply ceased to be, the blast wave and steel disintegrating them on the spot. Another two dozen Bolcavians were also killed instantly or nearly so, the carnage exacerbated by hot fragments piercing their lorry's gasoline tank. Although a far less violent explosion, the *whoompf* and resultant fireball served to further heighten the ambush's sudden shock.

CPT Hernandez was not aware of any of this. One moment he had been cautioning his driver. The next, he was on the turret floor, stunned with half his vision dark. Dimly, he could hear SPC Augustine screaming like a wounded animal. Starting to turn and ask something, Hernandez became aware he could not move his right arm.

“Oh shit! Sir!” Hernandez heard, the sound as faint as if it were coming from the other end of a long hallway. He tried to speak again, and this time the coppersy taste that filled his throat made him cough.

I’m hit, Hernandez thought.

“Contact! Black Si ...”

2LT Rogerson never got to finish his report, as the four Sprug anti-tank guns and two Kornet missile launchers aligned on Zhodkiva’s southern edge engaged his platoon. Well within their lethal range, the guns hit with two of their first rounds. Unfortunately for the young armor officer and his crew, both sabot rounds and a Kornet were all directed at C11. Unlike his company commander, Rogerson had no time to realize he was hit before spall and the ricocheting penetrator simultaneously cut off his transmission and his life. The second Kornet slammed into C13’s front hull, rocking that tank backwards with the explosion.

Aboard C66, Hernandez struggled to pull himself erect in the tank commander’s seat, the movement instead sending him sliding awkwardly forward. Catching himself with his left hand, Hernandez began choking as his throat continued filling with blood. Once more he attempted to spit and talk, but he could do neither as the tank lurched backwards. SPC Augustine screamed again as he was forced from his seat, collapsing in a boneless heap in front of his seat.

“On the way!” SGT Molnar shouted. The main gun’s breech came shooting backwards as the blast echoed in Hernandez’s ear. In the split second before it returned to battery, C66 was rocked by two impacts. CPT Hernandez had no real cognition of either Sprug sabot penetrating into the turret, only the flaming aftereffect as C66’s fuel and ammo began to burn. The tank’s halon bottles discharging briefly quenched the fire, giving his brain enough time to register the ruin that was SGT Molnar at the gunner’s station and his own missing left leg.

Becky ... he thought for a moment before his world went black.



Feliks fought the urge to shout in exultation as he watched the second Abrams begin to burn. The moment of joy was short lived, however, as the two platoons of American vehicles in the woods knocked out his final two Sprugs and one of this Kornets.

“Mortars! Mortars now!” he screamed into his radio. “Everyone, fall back into the city!”

Even as he gave his commands, he saw a burst of 25mm fire eliminate one of his two heavy machine guns. This was followed by one of the distant Abrams putting some sort of high explosive round into the second Kornet’s position at the base of an apartment building. The explosion was lost in the crack of several concrete walls splitting, then the entire left side of the building collapsed. Feliks closed his eyes, glad the sound of falling masonry and glass hid the screams of the individuals who had been too scared of his men to trust the designated shelters.

A handful of mortar shells burst among the Bolcavian personnel in front of the town, then the barrage suddenly stopped. Feliks had just depressed the hand mike to ask where the rest of the salvo was when the distant *crump! crump! crump!* of American artillery answered his question.

Their damn radars, he thought. I should have insisted the mortars be inside the city limits like I originally ordered.

He had argued with the officer in charge of the four 82mm weapons. The man had been insistent that being inside the city would have made it more difficult for him to engage targets so close to the southern edge. Now, as Feliks listened to the impact of 155mm shells, he realized that both of them had had the wrong focus. *I do not think poor Katanov will be engaging any targets from now on.*



“Any Cobra element, this is Mustang 6, your push!” LTC Milner barked, fighting to keep his voice somewhat calm as Mustang 66 moved rapidly forward. “Status report, now!”

The brief moment of silence he interjected into was quickly broken by the cacophony of Charlie Company talking back and forth. Before he could depress the hand mike again, he finally heard 1LT Dietze's angry voice on the battalion net. "Mustang 6, Cobra Five, contact with enemy direct and indirect, OBJ DIME," Dietze snapped. "Four victors damaged, Cobra 6 is hit, Cobra 5 OUT!"

LTC Milner felt his stomach churn. He heard the brief sound of someone breaking squelch, and forestalled Mustang 5 getting ready to admonish Cobra 5 for his net discipline. *1LT Dietze needs to fight his company*, he thought. *I need to get him help.*

"Cobra 5, understood, report when situation developed," he said, plumes of smoke starting to rise over the trees ahead of him. The fusillade of 25mm and main gun rounds had diminished, even as he could hear the final detonations from the brigade's artillery delivering counterfire onto the enemy mortar battery north of OBJ DIME.

"Mustang 5, make sure we get the report up to higher," LTC Milner ordered after gathering himself. "Mustang 3, I am en route to OBJ DIME."

"Roger, Mustang 6."

Milner looked at the map, then at his graphics. *I am so glad that the Strykers got here*, he thought. *Even if they and Anvil are still doing battle handover.*

"Dagger 6, Mustang 6," he began. "Be prepared to bypass OBJ DIME to the east and take up a blocking position between it and OBJ NICKEL."

LTC Milner heard Crafton's acknowledgement as he thought about his next steps.

"Anvil 6, I need you to advance to PL RED," LTC Milner stated. "You are to clear the copse of trees to the west of OBJ NICKEL and then establish eyes on OBJ NICKEL. Acknowledge, over."

"This is Anvil 6, roger!"

"Sir!" his loader shouted. The man's warning and the two tank guns' concussions slamming into him caused LTC Milner to look up.

“Driver stop!” LTC Milner shouted, realizing he was about to take Mustang 66 past the line of advancing TM Cobra tanks. There was bile in his throat as he looked around to see the carnage around him. C66 was clearly a total loss, the tank fully engulfed with secondary explosions rocking its hull. C11 looked like it was knocked out, and LTC Milner could see the loader’s body hanging lifeless out of the hatch. The Bolcavian militia had started to rally and was advancing on the town under TM Cobra’s covering fire. Bringing up his binoculars, LTC Milner saw Major Ivanovich exhorting men forward.

I may have underestimated that man, LTC Milner thought.

“Cobra 5, be prepared to lift and shift fires!” LTC Milner said into the radio, cursing the fact he had no direct communication with the Bolcavians.

“Mustang 6, this is Dagger 6, PL CYAN, over,” CPT Crafton reported.

“Mustang Main, this is Mustang 6,” LTC Milner said. “Adju ...”

The screeching sound in his radio made LTC Milner pull his combat vehicle crewman’s helmet (CVC) away from his head.

Jamming, he thought. *Dammit!*

“Coughlin, the alternate!” he barked.

Now we see if ILT Holmes’ PACE (primary, alternate, contingency, emergency) plan works, LTC Milner thought. The BN signal officer (SIGO) had been working hard since the first day to determine a way to get around Arcanian jamming. In conjunction with the BDE SIGO, Holmes had figured out at least three alternate nets for each company team and the TF Main. It had been hard work, and apparently the only reason Holmes had slept was MAJ Fitch had given him a direct order to, but LTC Milner was certain it was about to pay off.

“This is Mustang 6 on task force alternate,” LTC Milner began. “Radio check, over.”

“Mustang 6, Mustang Main, we read you loud and clear.”

As the remainder of the TF quickly shifted, LTC Milner could not hold back a triumphant grin despite the dire circumstances.

“Mustang Main, this is Mustang 6,” he continued. “Adjust the task force graphics to give TM Dagger some room to maneuver around TM Cobra. I want them to clear that group of trees east of OBJ DIME, then set along PL RED. We are going to trap the enemy in town.”

“Roger, Mustang 6,” MAJ Fitch replied.

“This is Anvil 6, I monitored and am moving,” CPT Wang reported.



“Take the ford site!” MAJ Santiago yelled into his CVC microphone. He felt a surge of pain as PFC Pope turned Mustang 63 sharply, the inertia causing him to bounce around in the TC’s hatch. He was about to start screaming at the man, then stopped.

This kid was stuck in the TOC (tactical operations center) 24 hours ago, Santiago reminded himself. SPC Wycott had been Mustang 63’s usual driver in addition to his Humvee gunner duties, while PFC Pope had been in the S-3 shop awaiting reassignment to a line company. MAJ Santiago winced as Mustang 63 hit a minor dip hard, causing a grunt from SGT Usher, 63’s gunner.

“Dammit Pope! Are you trying to give me a concussion?” Usher asked.

“Sorry, Sergeant!” Pope replied.

PFC Pope hasn’t driven a tank in nine months, and now I have him hauling down some two-lane hardball dodging craters, dead vehicles, and all other sort of debris like we’re heading to the Thunderdome, MAJ Santiago thought as they barreled into the ford site. He turned to make sure the scout platoon section was keeping pace with his tank as the Abrams splashed into the ford site in a massive spray of water.

“Mustang 3, Iron 5, TF Chevalier reports they’ve reached RTE Condor,” his headset crackled. Santiago had been monitoring his flank unit’s progress, which was why he had felt confident in withdrawing the scout section from the western flank.

We are going to have to pause to catch our breath, he thought angrily. Cobra ran into that trap because we were too damned concerned about our flanks rather than what was in front of us. He forced himself not to think about what had ensued the last time he’d gone north with a section of scouts.

“Iron 5, roger, I ...” MAJ Santiago began.

“Break, break, break! All elements, air defense is set to white tight, I say again, air defense is set to white tight,” COL Kendrick interrupted his transmission on the net. “Acknowledge.”

MAJ Santiago was about to key the battalion net when he heard Mustang 5 passing the information.

What is that all about? MAJ Santiago thought as the company teams acknowledged. He felt nausea as he heard Cobra 5 chime in, the sound of small arms fire in the background.

“Iron 6, this is Mustang Main, roger,” MAJ Fitch replied, saving MAJ Santiago the trouble.

“Iron Main, Strike Main, we have engaged and destroyed two technicals, report on BFT.”

I wonder why he didn't want to give the grid? MAJ Santiago thought, dipping his head down to look at the BFT.

“Sir, you want me to stop?” PFC Pope asked.

*That's a weird—*MAJ Santiago thought, turning forward just in time to see CPT Litvak waving frantically at them as she was running from her track.

“Yes, driver stop!” MAJ Santiago said, then immediately had to grab the edge of the TC's hatch to keep from being flung onto the turret roof. He ignored the cursing and shouting from the gunner and loader as he unsnapped his helmet. He was halfway through trying to get out of the hatch when his sutures and ribs reminded him that was now a deliberate process, not a reflexive one. In the time he took to gather himself, CPT Litvak had scrambled up the tank's front.

“Sir!” she said, pulling out her map sheet. “We detached my White element to TM Anvil.”

Wait, what? MAJ Santiago thought.

Seeing the expression on his face, CPT Litvak hurriedly explained. “Mustang 6 gave me a ‘be prepared’ mission to do so and it sounded like Cobra was in heavy contact,” she said, pointing at her map. “Do you want me to send my Mace element forward to give him some mortar support also?”

“Your what element?” MAJ Santiago asked, confused.

“My mortars, sir,” CPT Litvak replied, belatedly remembering she was in a different battalion than her own. “They’re not doing a damn thing here at this bridge.”

Before Santiago could answer, over a dozen cylindrical shapes passed at high speed overhead from south to north. To the west, there was the roar of a large formation of aircraft, also heading north.

That would probably explain why our request for fixed-wing support got denied, MAJ Santiago thought. MAJ Fitch had requested both close air support (CAS) and electronic warfare support for the TF’s movement north and been denied despite the Iron Brigade having priority across the division.

“Looks like someone is about to get an early lunch with the Air Force,” CPT Litvak observed, her smile almost feral.

“Might get us some MEDEVAC choppers finally,” MAJ Santiago observed grimly, listening as Cobra 5 began coordinating ground MEDEVAC for his wounded.

Once they got past the initial attack, it sounds like Cobra quickly gained the upper hand, MAJ Santiago thought. Still, one Abrams definitely destroyed, another at least a crew kill, and one Bradley a mobility kill is a lot of punishment.

“Mustang 6, this is Anvil 6,” CPT Wang reported. “I am set along RTE Condor. My Purple element has advised me that there may be a bypass along PL RED.”

“Anvil 6, Mustang 6 Golf,” came the reply. “Mustang 6 is on the ground talking with Cobra 5 and a host-nation commander.”

This is why they pay me the big bucks, MAJ Santiago thought.

“Anvil 6, do you have an element overwatching RTE FALCON?” MAJ Santiago inquired. CPT Litvak looked at her map, attempting to follow along while hearing only one side of the conversation.

“Roger, I have my White element with eyes on the exits out of OBJ DIME,” CPT Wang replied. “They do not have eyes on OBJ NICKEL. My Green element is clearing the copse of trees northwest of OBJ DIME and will move that way.”

“Roger, you may attempt to ascertain if there is a crossing site along PL RED,” MAJ Santiago stated. “Do not become decisively engaged, over.”

“This is Anvil 6, roger.”

“Mustang 5, Mustang 3,” MAJ Santiago stated, still listening to the chaos of the brigade net. It appeared that TF Strike’s engagement had turned into a running gunfight with several trucks equipped with anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs) mounted in the bed. So far Strike had lost an Abrams to one of the missiles, but was making liberal use of indirect fire to suppress and scatter the rest.

Wait a second, MAJ Santiago thought. We haven’t had to deal with much, if any, enemy indirect fire.

“Mustang 3, Mustang 5,” MAJ Fitch replied. “Send traffic.”

“I think it’s time to jump the Mustang Main north of PL ORANGE,” MAJ Santiago said. “Along with the trains. We’ve got most of our combat power north of PL ORANGE and we’re about to push forward.”

“We’ve got mechanics still working on platform recovery back with the trains,” MAJ Fitch stated. “Not a good time to move.”

“Mustang 3, Mustang 5, this is Mustang 6,” LTC Milner interjected. “We can have this conversation in person, not on the TF Net.”

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

- 1) CPT Wang and CPT Litvak made a decision between them to cross attach her 2nd Platoon temporarily to TM Anvil. What are your thoughts about this decision? Should junior officers await complete orders or is it proper to make task organization decisions based on senior leader vocal order (VOCO) guidance? What does doctrine say about task organization of assets and who controls them?
- 2) ISG McNair stated that he needs to get with ISG Lockwood regarding TF Mustang MEDEVAC procedures. What steps should a unit take to integrate an attachment during combat operations? Does this answer change with a truncated planning process?
- 3) What are some of the things that CPT Hernandez and TM Cobra did wrong during their approach to OBJ DIME? Should a unit even attempt to conduct key leader engagements during a large-scale combat operation?
- 4) When should a unit move its command post? When should a unit move its trains and other logistical nodes? What factors come into play when planning a move?
- 5) Do you agree with LTC Milner stopping the conversation between MAJ Fitch and MAJ Santiago? Why or why not?
- 6) What are alternate methods to conduct casualty evacuation (CASEVAC) when aircraft are not available?

CHAPTER 4

The Local Color is RED

CPT Wang looked at the Charon River, then at 1LT Borzkho, then back at the Charon.

“So I want to make sure we understand each other,” Wang said slowly. “You’re telling me that there’s an old Arcanian fording site right there? And you think it will support Bradleys, Strykers, and your tanks, but not Abrams?”

“Yes! I am sure of this!” Borzkho said, growing progressively more animated. “My uncle told me about it when I was a child.”

I can see the inquiry now, CPT Wang thought. Me trying to explain why I had a platoon of Bradleys get flooded down the river based on my host-nation platoon leader’s misty memories.

The two men and 2LT Farley were at the edge of a group of woods, flat on their bellies, looking across the Charon. While the Stamos (phase line [PL] ORANGE) was swollen, that was primarily due to its narrower channel. The Charon (PL RED) was barely four feet higher than it should have been, which was why Wang could just barely see the top of a leaning concrete pillar on the far side. The base for a similar pillar was 20 meters to their left, a plaque with worn writing on the front of it.

“You know they probably mined this ford, right sir?” 2LT Farley, his 1st Platoon leader, stated. “I mean, there’s no way they could have missed this.”

Their conversation was interrupted by three jets passing overhead, clearly using the river as a navigational aid. From their color scheme, CPT Wang could tell they were United States’ aircraft, but his mind rebelled at him trying to recall if they were Air Force F-15s or Navy F/A-18s. *Damn concussion, CPT Wang thought. Makes me wonder if I’m of sound enough mind to be making this decision.*

“Well 2LT Farley, you can inform the 15-6 officer that you advised caution,” CPT Wang said. He looked behind them at the overgrown tank trail that led down to where the alleged ford site began. “For right now, I want you to get your Javelins and machine guns here to set up a dismount support by fire position. Do not move forward with your Bradleys, as I don’t want someone on the other side to realize we’ve found this site.”

“Roger, sir,” 2LT Farley said, obviously dubious.

I would think I was crazy as well, but I’m definitely going to get the engineers up here to take a look, CPT Wang thought as the three men slipped backwards from the Charon. He remembered 2LT Brigante mentioning the engineers possessing limited rafting capabilities within their company headquarters.

I’m not sure this was what the doctrine authors had in mind when they wrote the manual, but we’re about to give it a shot, Wang thought.

Reconnaissance is a mission to obtain, by visual observation or other detection methods, information about the activities and resources of an enemy or adversary, or to secure data concerning the meteorological, hydrographic, or geographic characteristics of a particular area (JP 1-02). Conducting reconnaissance before and during other combat operations provides information for the commander to confirm, deny, and modify his concept of operations.—FM 3-98, *Reconnaissance and Security Operations*, 01 JUL 2015, page 5-1



Who would have thought that a reinforced company could cause so many problems? LTC Milner thought as Mustang 66 turned onto Zhodkiva’s main street. He watched as civilian refugees moved south under the watchful eye of Bolcavian soldiers. The stench of sewage, burning buildings, and dead people seemed to justify displacing even more civilians to the south.

One hell of a day’s work, he thought. TF Mustang was currently stopped on a line that ran parallel to the city’s northern edge. He’d gotten an update from CPT Crafton, CPT Wang, CPT Litvak, and 1LT Dietze. The last AGM holdouts had attempted to turn the city’s bank into an impromptu last stand barely 30 minutes before. That had not gone well, as Team (TM) Cobra’s 2nd Platoon had exacted a great deal of revenge pounding the building into rubble.

I hope we have enough 120mm ammo with the FSC (fire support coordinator) to resupply Cobra, LTC Milner thought. *I’m not worried about the fight north of town, but if there’s trouble after ...*

Movement caught his attention out of the corner of his eye. He turned to look to his right down an alleyway. Seeing Bolcavian uniforms, he relaxed and started to turn forward. It was only after his mind had processed what he had just seen that he reacted.

“DRIVER STOP!” he shouted, so loudly that it caused some of the civilians walking toward the command post (CP) to look up. “DRIVER BACK UP!”

As Mustang 66 began to roll slowly backwards, LTC Milner searched for his Kevlar and interceptor body armor (IBA). Finding them, he ordered PFC Domingo to stop the tank while making sure his pistol was loaded. Mustang 66 rolled to a stop, and he turned to SPC Coughlin. The loader was looking at him with wide eyes, having no idea what his battalion commander had seen.

“Switch to Cobra’s net, now!” he barked at SPC Coughlin. “Then be prepared to cover me with your weapon.”

“Y-y-es, sir,” Coughlin stammered as LTC Milner slipped the Kevlar on. He held his combat vehicle crewman’s helmet (CVC) in his hand and keyed the microphone.

“I need any Cobra element to immediately meet me six blocks south of the main government building,” LTC Milner said.

“Last calling station, this is Green One, please identify,” 1LT Malik answered.

LTC Milner kicked himself. “This is Mustang 6, out,” he finished.

“Sir, what’s going on?” SGT Cropps asked, turning around, concerned.

“A possible war crime,” LTC Milner replied, vaulting out of his hatch.

He saw that his tank’s arrival had at least frozen the tableau in front of him. Four men and one woman stood on top of an improvised gallows underneath a length of pipe suspended between two vehicles. From the handful of bodies already on the ground in front of the gathered group, the two squads of Bolcavians had been busy.

I don’t want to get myself shot, LTC Milner thought, seeing the angry expressions on the dozen soldiers’ faces.

“What are you doing?” he asked, struggling to keep his face calm. Two of the men were holding an older Bolcavian civilian at gun point.

“Executing traitors,” the Bolcavian noncommissioned officer (NCO) stated, then spat. “You are?”

LTC Milner felt rage welling up inside him as his face flushed. “I am Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Milner, United States Army,” he seethed. “I ...”

“I did not really care, in case you could not tell,” the Bolcavian NCO said disdainfully. “You are not my battalion commander, and he has ordered us to take care of this filth.” With that, the man started to turn around and gesture toward the other Bolcavian holding the bench.

For the rest of his life, LTC Milner would never remember drawing the pistol, much less pointing it at the Bolcavian NCO in front of him. He did belatedly hear the sound of Mustang 66’s turret adjusting behind him even as several of the Bolcavians pointed their own rifles back.

Well, Joe, fine mess you’ve got yourself into, he thought, strangely calm. Before he could speak, he heard movement at the alley’s entrance.

“Sir, is everything all right?” 1LT Malik asked, his tone indicating he knew everything was not all right.

“Everything is fine,” LTC Milner said, locking eyes with the Bolcavian NCO. The man was looking at him with utter hatred, but even he was not about to argue with a tank and infantry. LTC Milner heard the woman audibly cry out in relief.

Our uniforms, they have to mean something, he thought.

“1LT Malik, our good friends here have acquired some AGM (Arcanian Guardian Militia) for processing,” LTC Milner said. “Please secure the prisoners and speed them back so SPC Rice can question them.”

“Yes, sir!” 1LT Malik said. LTC Milner heard the sound of a Bradley pulling up beside Mustang 66 and slowly lowered his pistol.

“I will talk with LTC Sorokin,” LTC Milner said. “Until then, I am ordering my men to stop all executions in this town.” He paused as he considered his next words. “By any means necessary.”

Soldiers consider five important principles that govern the law of war when planning and executing operations: military necessity, humanity, distinction, proportionality, and honor. Three interdependent principles—military necessity, humanity, and honor—provide the foundation for other law of war principles—such as proportionality and distinction—and most of the treaty and customary rules of the law of war.

Law of war principles work as interdependent and reinforcing parts of a coherent system. Military necessity justifies certain actions necessary to defeat the enemy as quickly and efficiently as possible. Conversely, humanity forbids actions unnecessary to achieve that object. Proportionality requires that even when actions may be justified by military necessity, such actions not be unreasonable or excessive. Distinction underpins the parties' responsibility to comport their behavior with military necessity, humanity, and proportionality by requiring parties to a conflict to apply certain legal categories, principally the distinction between the armed forces and the civilian population. Lastly, honor supports the entire system and gives parties confidence in it.—ADP 3-0, *Operations*, 31 JUL 2019, pages 3-10



As the American soldier balanced carefully on the board resting on the park bench, Katenka struggled then lost against the urge to start sobbing uncontrollably. Her ribs burned with stabbing pain at each aching breath but she could not stop herself.

“It’s okay, you’re safe now,” the American said ... then nearly fell off the bench. There was a collective gasp from the men to her left and right as the bench rocked, then remained upright. The fighter beside her, a man who had just joined their cohort, gave a short sigh of surprise, then made a sound of disgust.

It is OK, my friend, she thought. We would have all soiled ourselves in death anyway, and that is far better than what I thought would happen to me today.

To Katenka’s anger, several of her fellow ethnic Arcanians had immediately pointed her out when the Bolcavian soldiers had made their way into the town shelter. The beating had been immediate, severe, and thorough, with the blows specifically aimed to keep her from losing consciousness.

“Could someone hold this thing steady!” the man trying to cut her down shouted, looking at his comrades. As her shoulders quaked, Katenka took in the scene of the Americans and Bolcavians angrily regarding one another, both sides just shy of pointing their weapons directly at the other side. Turning her head painfully against the rope, she saw the American tank with its barrel seemingly close enough to touch.

I don't want to die, she thought frantically. The day had been one of horror for her, from the fighting being close, to the beating, to seeing her uncle forced to watch as five of her friends were hanged in front of them. It had been the longest seven minutes of her life; the entire event joyfully narrated by the man who had been about to kick the bench again.

“Got it.” The snap of the noose’s tension brought her out of her memories. Two Americans had come forward to hold the bench steady, even as more stepped forward with what she recognized as plastic zip ties.

“LTC Milner, what is the meaning of this?” Katenka heard a voice shout from the alley’s entrance. She turned her head to see a Bolcavian officer, trailed by another in a militia uniform, stride angrily toward the American who had originally intervened.

“These American pigs seem to think they are in charge!” the Bolcavian NCO who had been overseeing the summary executions rattled off in their native language. “He pointed his weapon at me and interrupted us.”

“Hurry up, Mullins,” one of the Americans muttered. “I don’t want to get shot by ‘good’ Bolcavians because the old man wanted to save some bad ones.”

“Look, I’m not an expert in cutting down nooses!” the one who had saved her muttered. “Been a few generations since we had marshals in North Dakota.”

Katenka laughed at the absurdity of the situation as the Bolcavian officer began screaming at the American one.

“You understand what I am saying?” Mullins asked.

“Y-yes, I understand English better than I speak it,” Katenka said slowly. “I know Dakota territory. television show set there, no?”

“They killed my men!” the militia officer was yelling, his face red. “They tricked us! They lied to us!”

“Old dude better be careful, he’s going to stroke out,” Mullins’ companion said as they severed the final noose.

“I have eight of my own men dead in that field because of the same thing,” the American officer was saying, voice quaking. “But you know what? We’re Americans, and we don’t do this shit.”

“Welp, we’re all dead,” Mullins said.

“... woman is the niece and intelligence officer of the local AGM. That man is their leader!”

“Both sound like damned good people to leave alive for questioning,” LTC Milner replied.

“There are cameras,” Katenka said, her voice thick.

“What?”

“Tell your commander there are cameras,” Katenka stated. “For websites.”

Mullins turned her around to look at her. “What are you talking about?”

“Look above me by the drain pipe.”

Mullins followed her directions, then cursed. “Well, glad we didn’t let them hang you,” he muttered, then turned to yell back at another American officer. “Sir! Sir, we have a problem!”

Katenka looked at her uncle with her one good eye. The man grimaced and grunted in pain as the Americans forced his hands behind his back.

The growth of communication networks has decreased the number of isolated populations in the world. The emergence of advanced wired and wireless information technology facilitates global communication by corporations, violent extremist organizations, and individuals. The ability to share information in near real time, anonymously and/or securely, is a capability that is both an asset and a potential vulnerability to us, our allies, and our adversaries. Information is a powerful tool to influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp an adversary’s ability to make and share decisions.—Joint Publication 3-13, *Information Operations*, Change 1 (20 NOV 2014), page 1-1.



“... then the old man draws down on that Bolcavian lieutenant colonel like he’s Wyatt Earp or some shit.”

“What?”

“Yeah, he was all like ‘We’re Americans, asshole ...’”

Somehow I don’t think LTC Milner’s voice sounded quite like that, MAJ Santiago thought. He kept his eyes closed as PFC Domingo talked to PFC Pope about the events of several hours before.

Probably about time for me to get up anyway, MAJ Santiago thought. There was the distant *whump whump whump* of helicopter blades getting progressively louder. MAJ Santiago was about to ignore them, then thought back to the first day at engagement area (EA) BLACKJACK.

What are the odds that’s a Havoc? he thought, then forced himself to sit up. *Well, it’s either a Havoc or a big wig, and I don’t know which would be worse.*

Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, Santiago had an epiphany that sent a thrill through him. *Wait a second! If there’s rotary wing aircraft this far north, something has changed significantly!*

“MAJ Santiago! Warpath 6 is inbound!” 1LT(P) Mustaine shouted from just below Mustang 63’s turret.

“I believe they call that ‘here,’ Dave,” MAJ Santiago said jokingly. “Oh well, I can sleep when I’m dead.” The words were out of his mouth before he really thought about it.

“Let’s hope that doesn’t happen for a couple more days, sir,” Mustaine replied. “I don’t need a promotion that bad.”

MAJ Santiago shook his head. Mustaine was an eternal optimist, a trait rare in both planners and first lieutenants. Looking to the east, MAJ Santiago watched a UH-60 Blackhawk that was escorted by two circling Apaches land in the open roughly a kilometer away.

I really hope some enterprising AGM fire support officer isn’t calling in grids on where that helpful helicopter radar track just stopped, MAJ Santiago thought. *OPSEC (operations security) is a thing.*

OPSEC. A process of identifying critical information and subsequently analyzing friendly actions attendant to military operations and other activities.—*DOD Dictionary*

“Sir, you need help getting down?” PFC Pope asked, concerned.

“Thank you, Pope, but no,” MAJ Santiago said. “Quite frankly, if the division commander sees me needing help to get off a tank, you’ll have a new tank commander within 10 minutes.”

With that, MAJ Santiago scooted over to the side of the turret opposite of the helicopter, then ungracefully made his way to the ground. It was only because his subordinates were watching that the progress was made without a string of expletives and cries of pain, but he finally managed to reach the ground. *I forgot my damn sti—*

He didn’t have time to finish the thought before the walking stick MSG Woods had whittled for him before departing the previous day landed in front of him.

“Thanks, PFC Pope,” he called back to the turret.

“Sir, I don’t have time to relearn how to drive for someone else.”

“Sir, either my timing is really good, or really bad,” CPT Wang said, stepping out of the darkness. CPT Litvak was right behind him, clearly fighting hard to keep back a grin.

“Depends on what you’re about to tell me,” MAJ Santiago allowed, looking between the two of them.

I feel like I’m about to star in Saving Private Ryan meets Lethal Weapon, MAJ Santiago thought. *Litvak looks like she just mugged the President of Arcania and Wang is probably going to try to convince me we should take the man’s kidney with it.*

“The engineers and 1LT Loggins just got back from the far side of PL RED,” CPT Wang said.

MAJ Santiago felt faint, then realized it was a combination of the blood loss and him wanting to strangle Anvil 6.

“Quickly, explain to me why I’m not about to be relieving two company commanders!”

Wang and Litvak looked at each other, then back at him.

“Sir, we cleared the operation with MAJ Fitch,” CPT Wang said.

“He stated that we could do far side reconnaissance of the ford site?”

MAJ Santiago closed his eyes and counted to 10.

I’m going to kill Aubrey, he thought.

“Let us pretend, for a moment, that we do not live in a world where field grade officers share a collective consciousness at the task force level,” MAJ Santiago said. Both Litvak and Wang stared at him with blank looks. “In other words, MAJ Fitch didn’t tell me anything, and the division commander is probably inside of our TOC (tactical operations center) right now, so make it quick!”

The next five minutes were simultaneously the most horrifying and gratifying of MAJ Santiago’s stay in Bolcavia. On one hand, he was proud of the two company commanders for not only having had the initiative to organize the reconnaissance, but also the foresight to plan out what they were going to do if things went south. On the other, the fact he now had two platoons of infantry and engineer personnel, neither of which belonged to TF Mustang, scared the hell out of him.

Brigade will never give me external assets again, MAJ Santiago thought.

“So the engineers are sure the ford site will work for anything up to 40 tons?”

“2LT Brigante and her platoon sergeant suggest waiting until daylight to be sure, but yes,” Wang said.

“We’ll shift the boundaries to give Cobra responsibility for near side of OBJ (objective) NICKEL, you guys the far side,” MAJ Santiago said. “Given what happened with TM Cobra this morning, are you certain your eyes on the bridge aren’t missing someone in concealment?”

“To quote SFC Powers, my White Four, ‘I could have gotten in the mess line for the AGM and they wouldn’t have thought twice about it,’” CPT Litvak said.

MAJ Santiago turned and looked at CPT Wang. “Have you ever considered what would have happened if your 2nd Platoon had stumbled on some AGM militia out there taking a leak?” he asked.

“Sir, we had a plan,” CPT Wang said, then gestured at Litvak. “Bandito Six had pushed her mortar section up, and we would have done immediate suppression on the bridge site. The heaviest enemy vehicles there are a pair of Toyotas, one with some sort of ATGMs (anti-tank guided missiles) on the back deck, the other with a dual-mounted 23mm.”

“That doesn’t bring the bridge back if they blow it,” MAJ Santiago said.

“SPC Rice passed along intelligence from the prisoners LTC Milner saved,” CPT Wang replied. “Specifically, the enemy is trying to maintain bridges along one avenue of approach so they can possibly pass the Arcanian army forward if Arcania intervenes.”

Pretty sure I know when I’m boxed in, MAJ Santiago thought. Apparently one can go to sleep and the whole world changes.

“1LT Mustaine said he was going to run a couple courses of action past you and LTC Milner when you were both up from leader’s rest,” CPT Wang said. “We were coming back to see if any decisions had been made when the helicopter landed.”

MAJ Santiago looked toward Mustang Main. “Well, I think Warpath 6 will have some further guidance for us,” he said. “Let’s go see what he has to say, shall we?”

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

- 1) What internal assets does your unit have to conduct reconnaissance across a water obstacle? How large of an element should be sent across on a potential reconnaissance mission?
- 2) What responsibilities does an Army leader have with regards to intervening in host-nation affairs? What aspects of host-nation law apply against a hybrid threat? What resources does your unit have for inquiring into these matters before or during a large-scale combat operation (LSCO)?
- 3) The proliferation of wireless cameras and quickness with which extremist organizations can distribute footage means even relatively minor encounters can have an outsized impact. How do you think a tactical unit can mitigate this risk? What do junior Soldiers know about information operations and the possible impact of their actions? What should leaders be telling them?
- 4) What is your unit's plan for processing enemy prisoners of war (EPWs)? Is this part of your standard operating procedure (SOP)? How often do you practice it? How is it disseminated to the junior leader level?
- 5) How does a TF ensure all senior leaders know of significant events while maintaining a leader rest plan?
- 6) What are some disengagement criteria that CPT Wang could have employed on the far side of PL RED if his forces had made contact with the enemy? What assets are available within the battalion, the brigade, and the division?
- 7) What were some possible disengagement criteria that could have been set?

CHAPTER 5

The Bridge and the Anvil

“I was starting to wonder if we were going to get into this war at all,” CPT Gerald Crafton muttered by way of greeting to 1LT Dietze.

“The Hero of Blackjack complains about not getting enough action?” 1LT Dietze replied sarcastically after making sure no enlisted were within earshot.

You look like hell, Russell, CPT Crafton thought to himself, even as he grasped his friend’s hand in a firm shake. *Not the way you wanted to get a company.* CPT Crafton could see that his friend looked positively haunted, and the dark rings under his eyes spoke to a sleepless night.

“We’re still waiting on SPC Rice to get the latest imagery from division,” 1LT Dietze said.

“Imagery?” CPT Crafton asked, surprised.

“Seems that a bunch of planes that flew over yesterday targeted the AGM (Arcanian Guardian Militia) air defense network,” Dietze said. “Smacked it pretty hard, then hit a couple of fire support parks on their way out of Arcanian airspace. Rinse and repeat about two o’clock this morning, according to the FSO (fire support officer).”

“What?” CPT Crafton said, surprised.

“I was shocked to hear that myself,” 1LT Dietze said, then jerked his thumb to the east where the sky was just starting to lighten. “Doubly amazed to have that be the first sunrise of the day, given how crazy the Arcanians were about their ‘sovereignty.’”

I don’t think things would have gotten out of hand that quickly, CPT Crafton thought. But I am shocked that there’s not an Arcanian tank battalion sitting across PL (phase line) RED initiating bridging operations over our shredded corpses.

“Where is everyone?” CPT Crafton asked as they made their way around the tactical operations center (TOC).

“Most of the folks in the S-3 shop have been sent down to the line companies as replacements, sir,” 1LT Dietze observed. “That’s why there’s no sand table or rehearsal.”

Well, I hope that this is a relatively simple operation, CPT Crafton thought as they passed through the main.

As they passed the map, CPT Crafton stopped briefly to look at the task force's (TF's) primary map. As his gaze passed north of PL RED, he did a double take. "There are two platoons of infantry and one of engineers north of PL RED already?" he asked 1LT Goldstein.

The TF battle captain looked up from where he was replying to a division message. "We just updated the map, sir," Goldstein said. "Anvil just confirmed the frontline trace."

"Dagger 6, all will become clear to you if you get your ass in this tent," MAJ Fitch called from the plans area.

CPT Crafton looked at 1LT Dietze, the latter trying not to smirk. *Field grades ...*

"On my way, sir," CPT Crafton replied, passing into the next area. The TF area was represented by eight taped together pieces of butcher board on a large 8 x 8 piece of plywood. To call it a rough sketch would have been an insult to artists everywhere, but the major features and graphic control measures were represented.

Wait, where's Wang? CPT Crafton thought. *And who is she?*

The second question was answered as the woman came around the board and extended her hand. "CPT Crafton, CPT Litvak," the woman said. "Bandito 6."

CPT Crafton nodded, placing the voice to the radio traffic. Looking around the table, he noticed 1LT Loggins standing in the spot normally reserved for CPT Wang. Before he could say anything, LTC Milner began to speak. "OK everyone, we'll keep this under 20 minutes," he said. "Hold all your questions to the end."

There was murmured assent around the table.

"Last night we were visited by Warpath 6," LTC Milner began. "In addition to telling me my call sign on all higher nets is now 'Quickdraw 6,' Major General Bolten also passed along that the UN Security Council is considering a resolution calling for a cease fire in place approximately 24 hours from now."

CPT Crafton looked around the room at that news, seeing his own shock mirrored in his fellow commanders' faces.

“Most of you are probably wondering why we’re getting ready to initiate offensive operations in roughly one hour,” LTC Milner said, looking at his watch. “The short answer is because the president, in concert with the coalition’s other national leaders, has decided that Arcanian aggression cannot stand.”

Glad to see we’re calling it like it is, CPT Crafton thought angrily. Enough of this fiction about these guys being a militia that just ‘happened’ upon a reinforced division’s worth of heavy equipment one day.

“In light of the air strikes yesterday and two carrier groups having moved into the North Atlantic, it became clear to the Arcanians that escalation was not a good plan,” LTC Milner said. “So the CFLCC (coalition forces land component commander) has directed the Warpath division to seize defensible terrain north of PL RED.”

Glad to know that we were all engaged in a game of chicken where our side threw the steering wheel out the window.

“In any case, both with the destruction of fire support assets and ADA (air defense artillery) support, the AGM is now on this side of PL BLACK without an 800 pound gorilla backing them up. I’ll let 1LT Franklin cover the rest of the enemy situation.”

As the acting TF S-2 began talking rapidly about what forces were south of PL BLACK, CPT Crafton was surprised to feel a slight pang of sympathy for his opposite number.

I can’t imagine being tasked to hold a bridge against a full battalion, he thought. Even with the obstacles they apparently have hastily put in.

1LT Franklin specifically pointed out the obstacles just north of OBJ DOLLAR, apparently emplaced over the last couple of days. As 1LT Franklin explained, Warpath 2 believed the company had originally served as the brigade reserve for the Arcanian forces that had attempted to push through engagement area (EA) BLACKJACK along Route (RTE) FALCON. But now, the company team of BMP-3s and T-80s were likely attempting to prevent movement to PL BLACK by coalition forces until the clock ran out on the conflict.

You know, there is nothing wrong with letting the diplomats try to gain ground back, CPT Crafton thought briefly, then mentally kicked himself. The price of a mile is pretty steep regardless of whether it's paid at the table or on the field of battle.

PL RED was a natural defensive barrier, unlike the narrow creek that constituted PL BLACK. The intervening ground would be a lot easier to snatch from the Arcanians than trying to obtain it through negotiations.

“This will be a four-phase operation,” LTC Milner said. “Phase one will be TM Anvil’s attack on the bridge. It will end with TM Anvil in possession of the bridge and all explosives cleared from the structure.”

That would explain why CPT Wang is not here, if we’re starting within the hour, CPT Crafton thought.

“Phase two will begin with TM Cobra crossing the bridge and establishing a support by fire position overlooking OBJ DOLLAR,” LTC Milner stated. “It will conclude with TM Anvil’s vehicles in a support by fire position to the west of OBJ DOLLAR.” (See Figure 5-1.)

Oh shit, CPT Crafton thought, knowing what was about to happen.

“Phase three will be the deliberate breach of the obstacles at OBJ DOLLAR by TM Dagger,” LTC Milner continued. “It will conclude with the destruction of the enemy company and movement north along RTE HAWK and FALCON. Phase Four will consist of the establishment of a hasty defense south of PL BLACK in order to prevent mechanized movement of hostile forces south of PL RED. It will conclude with the cease fire or the change of mission from this task force.”

This is going to be a rapid 24 hours, CPT Crafton thought. I just hope we don’t get going so fast that we trip over ourselves.

Before LTC Milner could continue, he was interrupted by the sound of the battalion mortars opening fire. Before Mustang 6 could ask, 1LT Goldstein pushed into the plans tent. “Sir, TM Anvil has initiated operations.”



If CPT Wang had been a charitable man, he would have felt a slight twinge of sympathy for the four dead militia men. They had appeared to be deserting, having slipped away from the bridge at OBJ NICKEL one by one. Unfortunately, their rally point had been roughly 200 yards from where CPT Wang, 2/B/1-45IN, and 2LT Farnum's men had been lying prone awaiting H-hour. The gathered group had occupied a spur to the northwest of OBJ NICKEL, the terrain feature part of the gentle rise as RTE FALCON ran northward toward the border.

Why did you raise your weapon, you idiot? Wang thought angrily, looking at the dead or dying AGM militia member. The teenager had spotted something amiss, started to walk toward the trees, then raised his AK to his shoulder while shouting something at his comrades. CPT Wang was almost nauseous, thinking the young man could have been any of his daughter's friends attending prom in less than a week.

"Anvil 6, splash over!"

It seemed as if the mortar rounds arrived just as the 'r' was finished being broadcast from his FSO. One moment the 30 or so AGM at the north end of OBJ NICKEL had been reacting to the fusillade of small arms barely 600 yards away to their northwest. The next, mortar rounds were exploding all around their tents, vehicles, and the pair of anti-tank missile launchers in the fighting positions pointing to the south.

Can't give them a chance to get their feet underneath them, Wang thought. He watched as another salvo caused something to explode in a secondary detonation, the resultant blast flinging a sedan end over end down the position.

"Guns, guns, cease fire!" CPT Wang said into his hand mike. Getting an acknowledgment, he turned to 2LT Farnum.

"You Javelin anything coming down that road from the north, you understand?"

"Roger, sir," 2LT Farnum said with a smile.

“Rieger, Brigante, let’s go!” CPT Wang shouted. His platoon of infantry and the engineers rose almost as one, heading down to where the final mortar salvo was landing at a quick trot. They had covered half the ground before one of the AGM apparently recovered, firing a burst of AK fire in their direction that sent the advancing Americans to ground. The weapons’ burst was quickly answered by 1LT Rieger’s platoon, and the hard part of taking OBJ NICKEL began.



In the end, the butcher’s bill was relatively cheap for TM Anvil. In exchange for one soldier being bruised when his battle armor stopped a round that could have killed him and another two wounded by grenade fragments, 15 minutes of fire and maneuver found CPT Wang standing in front of 10 bound prisoners as 2LT Brigante and her engineers began quickly clearing the bridge.

“Mustang Main, this is Anvil 6,” he began, speaking into his hand mike. “OBJ NICKEL is seized. I say again, OBJ NICKEL is seized.”

There was a long pause.

“Roger, Anvil 6,” LTC Milner’s voice came a moment later. “I am heading to your location.”

“Anvil 6, Sauron One, your push,” 1LT Konnor Hendrickson, the Scout Platoon leader called. “Request permission to pass over ahead of your element in order to start obstacle reconnaissance.”

I think I would have waited to see if there’s a counterattack coming, CPT Wang thought. Actually, I’m not going to give him an option of getting himself killed.

“Negative, Sauron, stand by until I get my Purple element north of PL RED,” CPT Wang said.

“Roger,” 1LT Hendrickson replied.

“Purple One, this is Anvil 6, what is your status?” There was a long silence, and CPT Wang had the mental image of 1LT Borzkho attempting to figure out how he wanted to answer.

“I am at north end of passage with my tank,” 1LT Borzkho finally answered. “Tell 2LT Farnum that next time he should not doubt locals.”

“This is White One, I monitored,” 2LT Farnum replied. “I’ll buy ... CONTACT! CONTACT THREE TANKS!”

Well shit, CPT Wang thought, turning to look toward 2LT Farnum’s position just in time to see three 125mm shells impact at the base of the woods. *This is about to get sticky*, he thought. Turning, he was about to make a comment to 1LT Rieger when there was the sound of incoming indirect fire. Throwing himself flat, CPT Wang saw the four shells impact almost equidistant between 2LT Farnum’s position and his.

That’s probably unobserved fire, he thought. He cursed the fact that the rise of terrain from PL RED kept him from actually seeing the advancing Arcanian vehicles. Two Javelins heading away from Farnum’s positions told him that the advancing T-80s were getting closer, fast. Then the next group of mortar shells exploded almost right on top of where Farnum’s soldiers were.

“Dammit!” CPT Wang shouted, then regained control of himself.

“Guns, can we do something about those ...” he started to ask on the company net. He was interrupted by the task force mortar platoon leader on the battalion net.

“Anvil 6, Hammer 6, we are engaging enemy indirect platforms now.”

“1LT Rieger, get your Javelins ready!” CPT Wang shouted, just before another salvo of mortar shells landed. That group, however, had only three bursts, as CPT Wang heard the distant explosions of TF Mustang’s own mortars landing somewhere to the north.

As long as they can get that indirect turned off, we should be fine, CPT Wang thought. The foolishness of that belief was clear a few moments later as the first T-80 came over the hill, its turret to the right as its main gun fired once more at Farnum’s position. He did not even have to give the order to 1LT Rieger, as three Javelins shot out toward the lead AGM tank.

Oh. Shit. CPT Wang thought as he watched two of the missiles destroyed by the onrushing main battle tank’s (MBT) active defense system. The third, fired hastily by a panicked operator, flew straight at the AGM tank rather than popping up in its most effective flight path. The T-80’s reactive armor panels exploded, the behemoth rushing forward as the turret swung back around. Its gunner was quick on the draw, the 125mm gun firing right at one of the Javelin positions.

CPT Wang cursed in helplessness as he watched two of 1LT Rieger's soldiers go sailing through the air with the debris of their launcher. His despair grew as a second Arcanian T-80 dispatched a second Javelin crew with a burst of coaxial and commander machine gun fire.

The T-80's victory was short lived. CPT Wang was just getting ready to ask Purple what their location was when two sabot rounds to the lead tank answered the question. The first penetrator, striking at an angle, skimmed off the rounded turret's side in a shower of sparks and exploding reactive cells. The second hit at the joint of the turret in a shower of sparks that was immediately followed by the orange-white flames of the tanks' ammunition propellant. CPT Wang was close enough to hear the screams of the driver. The T-80's turret exploded into the air with a thunderous *whump!*

Thank you, 1LT Borzkho, CPT Wang thought, watching the structure rotate like some obscene metal lollipop.

Over the cries for medics and desperate screams of wounded Soldiers, CPT Wang heard the sound of another secondary explosion as the third T-80 in the AGM platoon burst into flames on the rise. The final T-80, belatedly realizing it was under fire from the flank, started to rotate its turret just in time for three TOW-2s launched from 2LT Farnum's Bradleys past Purple to impact the tank. Lurching to a stop, black smoke pouring from its turret, the T-80's turret and driver's hatches opened. The tank commander (TC) was halfway out of the hatch, his uniform on fire, when at least two machine gun bursts sent him tumbling off the turret. The driver was even less fortunate, dragging himself halfway out before a spot of flame surrounded him. Another burst of machinegun fire ended the driver's suffering.

"Anvil 6, I say again, what is your situation?"

Shaking himself, head throbbing once more, CPT Wang realized that the voice in the hand mike was LTC Milner desperately trying to reach him. The secondary explosions from the nearest T-80 made it difficult to hear, and he fought the urge to throw up as the wind shifted to bring the smell of burning propellant, fuel, and flesh to him.

"Sir!" he heard 2LT Brigante yell as she came running up toward him. "The bridge is clear of explosives and it's good to go!"

"Mustang 6, Mustang 6, this is Anvil 6," CPT Wang said wearily, signaling to 2LT Brigante he had heard her. "Remagen. I say again, Remagen."

“Anvil 6, this is Mustang 6, roger,” LTC Milner replied, his voice clearly relieved. “Understand Remagen. Cobra 5, Dagger 6, did you monitor?”

Looking back to the northwest to where 2LT Farnum’s vehicles were rushing to rejoin their platoon leader, CPT Wang listened as the other two company commanders checked in. He shifted the radio on his back, and thought of SPC Maclemore for a brief moment.

“Anvil 6, White Four,” SFC Kruse, 2LT Farnum’s platoon sergeant, called for him on the company net.

“White Four, Anvil 6, send your traffic,” CPT Wang said, fearing what was coming next.

“I have casualties in the fighting position,” SFC Kruse said. “Three KIA (killed in action), four WIA (wounded in action) with one litter urgent.”

“White Four, Anvil 7, I copied your transmission,” 1SG Lockwood said. “Starting MEDEVAC (medical evacuation).”

“Hold traffic,” CPT Wang stated, forcing himself to take back over the fight. “Purple, I need you to set up on that terrain feature where the furthest T-80 from my position is. White Four, tie in with him. Gold One, you stay here with Griffon One and secure this bridge.”

As the platoons acknowledged, CPT Wang heard the sound of turbines and diesels in the distance. Turning, the first thing he saw was the six Humvees of Sauron platoon hauling tail down RTE Falcon. 2LT Brigante began shouting at her Soldiers to be careful of the incoming vehicles. To Wang’s relief, they listened, clearing the bridge roadway to let Sauron pass.

I need to tell him what the situation is, Wang thought. Shaking off his fatigue, he ran toward the end of the bridge while waving his arms. Seeing him, the lead Sauron vehicle slowed, then stopped. Looking at bumper numbers, CPT Wang made his way down to the third vehicle just as 1LT Hendrickson was getting out.

“Those T-80s counterattacked about 10 minutes after we took the bridge!” he told the Scout platoon leader. “I don’t have any eyes farther than that next ridgeline 2,000 meters out.”

1LT Henrickson nodded at the report, pulling out his mapsheet. “Mustang 3 told us to pass to the west of that copse of trees,” he said, pointing to the woods that extended for roughly two kilometers west of OBJ DOLLAR. “The aviation brigade has a couple of choppers out there, and they haven’t seen a damn thing from there to PL BLACK.”

We need more graphic control measures, CPT Wang thought. We’re moving a little too hastily for my taste.

“Let me see your map,” CPT Wang said. 1LT Henrickson handed the board over, somewhat perplexed. Reaching inside his tactical vest, CPT Wang grabbed out a black marker only to find it had been smashed at some point during the morning.

“Sir, here’s one,” 1LT Henrickson said. CPT Wang hastily drew a line.

“We’ll call that PL UTAH,” CPT Wang said. “You don’t go past that line until either Mustang 3 or 6 tells you to. I don’t want you out there flapping when ...”

Another massive detonation from the nearby T-80 sent fragments and debris pelting the area near them. Several large pieces hit a couple of Sauron’s Humvees. Behind them, the lead TM Cobra tank stopped for a moment as the T-80 burned even more fiercely. 2LT Brigante signaled furiously for the tank to keep moving, concerned about the bridge’s maximum load capacity.

“Roger, sir, understood,” 1LT Henrickson said, looking at the burning T-80 with some concern.

“Get going, and good luck!”

Intelligence preparation of the battlefield and the enemy situation

template. Conventional near-peer opponents normally adhere to doctrinal employment methods until they no longer work. Using a modified combined obstacle overlay to discern the effects of the battlefield against an enemy doctrinal template yields a situation template which is nothing more than a prediction on where the enemy is located based upon their organization, weapons systems, and employment methods. Mixing proxy unconventional forces into this mix complicates that process.—Army Techniques Publication 3-90.4, *Combined Arms Mobility*, 08 MAR 2016

“Mustang 6, Iron 6, SITREP (situation report).” LTC Milner had just hauled himself back into Mustang 66 after a hurried huddle with CPT Wang.

The counterattacking T-80s had been an unpleasant shock, as had been the rapid application of AGM indirect fire. TM Anvil had 10 KIA and 15 WIA between themselves, the engineers, and the attached Bandito platoon. The only silver lining was the utter lack of heavy artillery assets or continued mortar fire after the Hammer and Mace elements had apparently won their duel.

Maybe we need to name them “Quickdraw” after all this is over, LTC Milner thought with a slight smile.

“Iron 6, this is Mustang 6,” he began. “I have my Cobra and Anvil elements across PL RED. No change in mounted combat power, but I have lost several Javelins in Anvil. Continuing to advance in preparation of conducting a breach to seize OBJ DOLLAR.”

“Roger Mustang 6,” COL Kendrick replied. “I need you to hold tight for four hours. Gunslinger 6 has stated he can provide two attack helicopter teams in that time.”

LTC Milner looked at his watch. *That will give us time to get TM Anvil and Cobra better into position and Crafton a chance to do a hasty rehearsal,* he thought. He looked at the sun’s position in the sky. *Plus a chance to do refuel operations on this side of PL RED.*

“Roger Iron 6, we can hold,” he responded. “I’d like to get my scouts out to the west so that I have some protection on that flank.”

“Understood,” COL Kendrick replied. “Be advised that TF CHEVALIER is crossing PL RED at this time at another ford site.”

The irony was that the Arcanians were apparently so worried about airpower potentially dropping bridges that they’ve provided plenty of crossing sites, LTC Milner thought.

“Mustang 6, this is Chevalier 6,” an accented voice came over the brigade net. “I have an officer en route to your location with information on my plan.”

“Chevalier 6, Mustang 6, acknowledged, over,” LTC Milner said.

I don’t know a damn thing about their task force, he realized. *Other than they have a battalion of Leclercs and some British light tanks.*

Reverse Breach Planning. Reverse planning is the process of determining and allocating breach assets to support a maneuver plan. It starts with determining the size and composition of the force that will conduct the final assault onto the objective. This force will dictate lane requirements for number and types of lanes. The lane requirement and templated obstacle composition then drives the types of required engineer assets to reduce, proof, and mark the lanes. By starting on the objective and working backward, planners ensure that assets are massed at the decisive point and the plan supports the commander's scheme of maneuver. The steps of reverse breach planning are—

Step 1. Identify available reduction assets.

Step 2. Template enemy obstacles.

Step 3. Understand the scheme of movement and maneuver.

Step 4. Identify the number of required breach lanes.

Step 5. Identify the assets required to reduce, proof, and mark lanes.

Step 6. Task organize reduction assets within the maneuver force.

—Army Techniques Publication 3-90.4, *Combined Arms Mobility*, 08 MAR 2016

The next ten minutes of coordination via radio gave LTC Milner a general idea of what he would do in the intervening hours. Anubis Six, company commander for A/9th Engineers, had briefed him on his breach asset status shortly after his hasty orders briefing that morning. After the operations at OBJ NICKEL and QUARTER, Anubis was down to three line charges. Although manual breaches were possible with the surface-laid hasty obstacles near OBJ DOLLAR, employing those would be tough sledding given the company of BMP-3s sitting overlooking the obstacles.

Not your father's BMP, LTC Milner thought grimly. Although the terrain was not as flat as it looked, he knew that up to now the AGM had proven to be capable planners and fighters. That meant they had likely sited the obstacles in such a manner to maximize their direct fire systems' effectiveness.

I would love to bypass to the west, but that's a bit problematic as well, LTC Milner thought. Although it looked open, talking with the Bolcavians had revealed that much of the terrain was deceptively marshy. Although their and the Arcanians' vehicles could traverse patches of it, it was not suitable for the heavier American tanks. In addition, the main north-south avenue, RTE HAWK, was well within direct fire range of PL BLACK.

"Sir, Mustang 3 is trying to get your attention!" SPC Coughlin said, pointing. Looking to his right, LTC Milner saw Mustang 63 pulling up alongside but facing south.

"Dagger's done with rehearsal!" MAJ Santiago shouted from his TC's position. "I told Crafton that Iron 6 wanted to slow the roll, so he's taking time to do some final coordination with Anubis."

"I'll come over to your track," LTC Milner said. He was just starting to pull himself out of his hatch when two of the Bolcavian tanks opened fire.

Aw hell, what now? he thought, slipping back into his TC's hatch.

"Red air! Red air! Northwest, five kilometers!" he heard CPT Wang reporting excitedly. "Two attack helicopters!"

No sooner had the man finished his report than one of the Bolcavian tanks' active defenses fired. Though distant, LTC Milner still saw the brown puffs of smoke that told him the clouds of flechettes had done their job.

Great, that idiot Morris' bad planning is the gift that keeps on giving, he thought, turning to look at the sole Avenger system that was left from their defense. The crew was already looking to the northwest, scanning slowly. It was when the Avenger stopped scanning that LTC Milner began to worry and brought his own binoculars up.

"Sir, you want me to put an MPAT (multi-purpose anti-tank) in the tube?" SPC Coughlin asked.

Before LTC Milner could answer, there was a sound like ripping canvas as four missiles streaked down from overhead. In the distance, just above the tree line, there were two flashes, followed shortly by rising plumes of smoke.

I think someone just had a very bad day, LTC Milner thought. A few moments later, the brigade command net confirmed his suspicions.

"All Iron elements, this is Archangel. The United States Air Force thanks you for your attendance at today's demonstration of air superiority."

Well, the ALO (air liaison officer) seems to be in good spirits, LTC Milner thought, laughing.

“I think the problem is solved, SPC Coughlin,” LTC Milner replied.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

- 1) Does your unit have an internal casualty replacement plan? If so, what units have priority? What command and control functions are the first to be depleted to make up losses? Is there a plan to cross-level military occupational specialty (MOS) (i.e., use infantry as armor crew and vice versa)? What input will company leaders have in this process?
- 2) What are your thoughts on the lack of a terrain table and rehearsal for TF Mustang's operation?
- 3) Does your unit SOP address orders, rehearsals, etc.? Does this include discussing seating, agenda, and other recurring matters? Why or why not?
- 4) It appears that CPT Wang overestimated the effectiveness of his anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs) with regards to stopping an Arcanian counterattack. What other steps could TF Mustang have taken to prepare for possible enemy action? Should there have been a different task organization or boundary shift?
- 5) What are your thoughts on CPT Wang giving impromptu orders to the Scout Platoon? Is this a correct action for a company commander to take with a TF asset? Why or why not?
- 6) How will your unit conduct flank unit coordination with a joint or multinational partner? Does your SOP address this? What are some steps that the Iron Main could have taken to facilitate this process?
- 7) What internal assets does your unit have to deal with enemy rotary-wing assets and unmanned aircraft systems (UASs)? Does the SOP discuss their employment?
- 8) At what point would you employ the technique of unobserved fires in LSCO?

CHAPTER 6

The Martian Philharmonic

“Guidons, this is Mustang Main. Status report.”

MAJ Santiago scanned as each of Task Force (TF) Mustang’s teams transmitted their current situation in response to MAJ Fitch’s transmission. The TF was arrayed with Teams (TM) Cobra and Anvil along phase line (PL) UTAH, and TM Dagger with the accompanying engineer assets 800 meters to the south. They’d had to wait an additional four hours while the Iron Brigade moved its artillery assets forward to be able to possibly range across PL BLACK.

“Guns, activate CFZs (critical friendly zones) one and two at this time,” LTC Milner ordered.

The Arcanian company had emplaced their disruption obstacles to the west and abreast of Route (RTE) FALCON. Additional obstacles had been placed into the tree line to the west in order to force TF Mustang into the kill zone that basically encompassed objective (OBJ) DOLLAR. In the now five hours since TM Anvil had seized the bridge at OBJ NICKEL, TM Anvil had exchanged fire with the BMPs at the far end twice. Both times had been indecisive other than positively identifying one of the Bolcavians’ hide positions for targeting by indirect fire. However, absent one section of 155mm guns firing across boundaries from TF STRIKE’s sector, TF Mustang would have to provide most of its own lethal indirect support. (See Figure 6-1 on page 101.)

Much rather have the guns focused on counterbattery fire anyway, MAJ Santiago thought. It’s a trade-off.

In addition, TF Mustang had four sorties of close air support (CAS) dedicated to their assistance, plus the aforementioned gunship section from the aviation brigade.

How I long for the days when there was CAS stacked to the heavens and we never wanted for fire support, MAJ Santiago thought, looking forward to where TM Anvil was prepared to cross the intervisibility (IV) line. If he was being fair, there had been unique circumstances that had allowed such freedom of support during the nation's wars in the Middle East. He could not blame his division and coalition forces land component commanders (CFLCC) for wanting to husband assets in case the Arcanians responded poorly to the border being restored.

Like the gun bunnies, if the flyboys keep me from being able to testify firsthand about Arcanian rocket launchers, I'm good, MAJ Santiago thought. The Iron G-2 had stated that a reinforced mixed battery of Arcanian artillery was the extent of indirect that had survived the past day's air strikes.

"Hey sir, isn't it your daughter's birthday?" SGT Usher asked suddenly, continuing to slowly scan.

MAJ Santiago looked at his watch, then laughed. "Yeah, guess it is," MAJ Santiago replied. "I'm not even going to ask why or how you remembered that."

"It's the same day I got divorced from my first wife," SGT Usher replied. "Always thought that was kind of crazy."

MAJ Santiago laughed. "Not the same year, right?"

"No, sir, the exact same day and year," SGT Usher replied. "Just goes to show that there's always something going on to someone else in the world."

"Well, let's hope this is a day a bunch of those assholes on the other side don't forget," PFC Pope said angrily from the driver's seat.

MAJ Santiago could understand the young man's anger, even if he didn't share it. Looking at his watch, he started calculating some things in his head. *Sweet mercy, this is probably the start of the time casualty notifications will happen,* he thought. *Right now there's some poor bastard getting ready to knock on Kathryn Vraciu and Becky Hernandez's door.*

"Sir! Sir! Mustang 6 just sent up a green star cluster!" SPC Coughlin said.

Turning to look, MAJ Santiago saw the pyrotechnic descending. He keyed his mike, hearing only silence. "Freakin' figures! The damn Arcanians are jamming us again," he said. "Switch nets, now!"

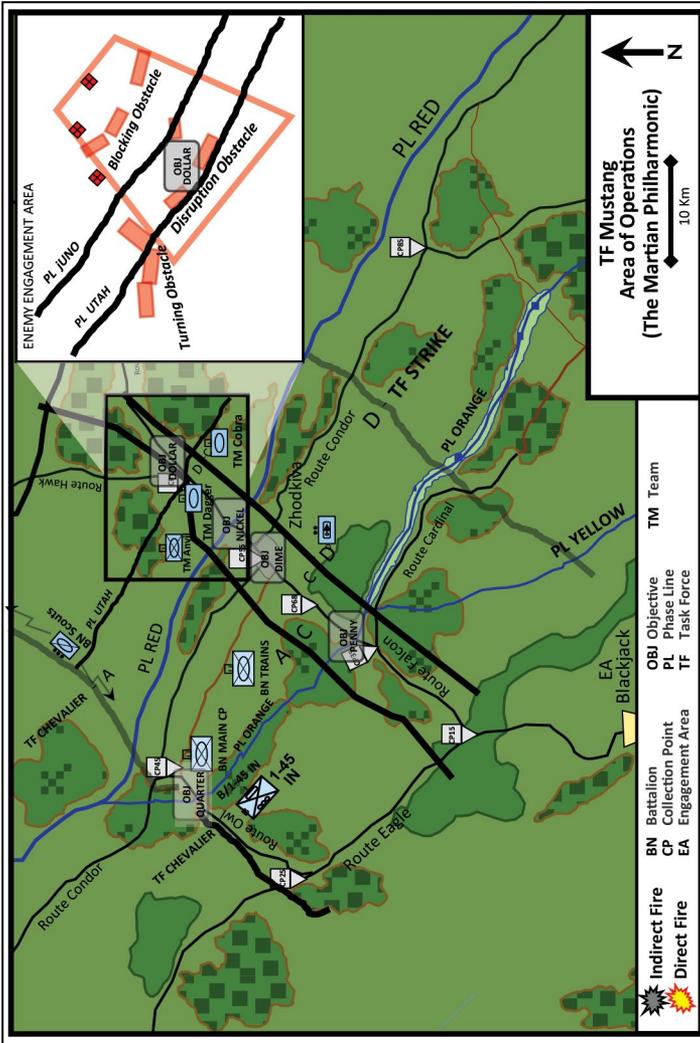


Figure 6-1. TF Mustang area of operations (the Martian philharmonic)



For what we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly thankful, CPT Wang thought, seeing the second green star cluster shoot up from Mustang 66.

“Guidons, guidons, guidons,” he said. “Attack! Repeat, attack!”

The acknowledgments told him that at least TM Anvil’s comms net wasn’t being jammed. As he watched Purple once gain nose over the slope, he grabbed the star cluster sitting next to his Bradley’s hatch and popped it. The white pyrotechnic both signaled to Mustang 6 that he had seen the signal and also told the 120mm mortars located 400 meters to his southwest to begin firing their obscuration.

You can be my flank unit anytime, CPT Litvak, he thought. The Stryker company commander had once more placed her units in the best position to support Wang and his force. Although the Strykers lacked the direct fire ability to be most effective in support by fire, B/1-45IN had infiltrated forward far enough to ensure that Arcanian dismounts weren’t going to hit TM Anvil in the flank once they took up their support by fire position.

“Contact! Multiple BMPs!”

“Sagger drill!” someone shouted over the company net, not realizing they weren’t speaking to their crew.

As if they were at the pin end of Hell’s own bowling alley, TM Anvil was suddenly confronted with several inbound anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs) in the gathering dusk. The majority of the fire was aimed at Purple Platoon, the Bolcavian T-72s suddenly alight in the gloom from their active defenses, reactive armor, and the bright flight of a secondary explosion.

Several missiles, however, were aimed at two Bradleys. 2LT Farnum’s crew joined their platoon leader in death as A21 exploded from at least two AT-11 Sagger impacts. It was clear from the immediate fireball that there would be no survivors, even as a third missile slammed into the wreckage. A22 was slightly luckier, the crew having time to begin abandoning the burning Bradley.

CPT Wang was keying his microphone to begin calling for medical evacuation (MEDEVAC) when the familiar sound of incoming indirect was audible over the Bradley. There were several *crack* sounds in the sky, then suddenly the ground around the Stryker mortar section was alive with explosions as the cluster bomblets impacted. With a dull roar, one of the two Stryker mortar vehicles exploded. Its companion, just outside of the lethal sheaf, began backing up.

Where in the hell is the counterbattery fire?



LTC Milner, watching in horror as TM Anvil was engaged, was about to ask the same thing on the Iron net. He was stopped by the brigade (BDE) fire support officer (FSO) reporting outbound rocket fire as well as fixed-wing strikes going in after the responsible Arcanian artillery assets.

Now for the direct firefight, he thought, fighting the urge to pull up to where TM Cobra was engaging enemy targets. Fires to the north told him that the shooting wasn't all one-sided, even at the extended ranges the Arcanians were engaging with their missiles.

"Mustang 6, Deathbringer 6, your push," an unfamiliar voice said over the battalion net.

"This is Mustang 6," LTC Milner replied.

"We have your elements in sight as well as hostile, please send frontline trace."

Glad the aviators finally showed up! Looking at his reception, staging, onward movement, and integration (RSOI) cheat sheet, he realized that Deathbringer 6 was an attack battalion commander.

Weird to be out here flying himself, LTC Milner thought, even as he listened to MAJ Fitch obtain the required information and pass it to the Apaches.

"Driver move us up," he ordered, his mouth getting cotton. "Gunner fire and adjust as you see targets."

“Roger, sir!” SGT Cropps said from his position. As Mustang 66 moved up to the intervisibility line a few hundred meters south of PL UTAH, LTC Milner counted at least six burning vehicles in TF Mustang. To the north, however, he saw at least that many fires, and noted that the majority of the ATGM fire had stopped. A small smoke screen was starting to build near TM Dagger’s planned breach point, but the obscuration was not as good as he would have liked it.

“On the way!”

The warning was just in time for LTC Milner to drop back into the TC’s hatch. The blast rocked Mustang 66 back on its tracks, and was followed by a curse from SGT Cropps. LTC Milner popped up just in time to see a white ball of flame heading for his vehicle.

“Driver, back up!” he shouted, dropping into the hatch. The cry was too late, Mustang 66 rocking again as the missile hit them.

“Crew report!” LTC Milner choked out, acrid smoke coming down through the TC’s hatch.

“Driver okay!”

“Loader okay!”

“Gunner okay!”

“Mustang 6, Deathbringer 6, I am engaging,” came the aviator’s call. As LTC Milner popped back up out of his turret, he was in time to see eight missiles impacting nearly simultaneously on what he guessed were four targets. The volley was successful, as the secondaries and fires at all four locations were visible even at LTC Milner’s great distance.

“Mustang 6, this is Deathbringer 6, we obviously hit a nerve,” came the aviator’s laconic report. “We’re being painted by ADA (air defense artillery), breaking contact.”

“Roger, thank you Deathbringer 6,” LTC Milner said, fervently hoping he wasn’t about to have another Apache downed in his area.

“Mustang 6, Mustang 3, I think it’s time to commit Dagger!”

“Roger,” LTC Milner said. “Guidons, vex, vex, vex.”

LTC Milner turned to see his loader smiling. *I don’t know why he chose that code word for committing TM Dagger, but we rolled with it.*



So this is what it feels like to get the ball on fourth and goal at the one in the damn Super Bowl, CPT Crafton thought, blood rushing in his ears.

“White, let’s go!” he barked into the radio.

In front of him, his White Platoon began pushing forward from the bridge. Their lane of advance was right down RTE FALCON, passing between where Anvil and Cobra were continuing to fire at what remained of the Arcanian company.

As he moved forward, CPT Crafton could see the dim shapes of the Apaches, descending below the trees along PL RED, skimming down the river in an attempt to avoid Arcanian surface-to-air missiles (SAMs).

Turning back to his front, TM Anvil and Cobra’s firing line resembled something from Dante, with vehicles silhouetted by the burning carcasses of their dead comrades. Medic M113s were moving backwards toward the bridge, heading toward the battalion aid station just south of PL RED.

It’s like a symphonic movement, CPT Crafton thought. Everyone is playing their part, and we are making the most horrifying of music.

He saw White starting to falter as they neared the crest of the hill. “Get over, White, get over! Don’t stop moving until you reach the edge of the minefield!”

Lord help us if they dug some mines over in front of the very obvious ones, he thought.

The intent was for White to drop their plows 100 yards short of where the minefield started, then move forward with spoil until they had their first mine strike. Only then would Longstrider platoon come up behind them with the mine-clearing line charge (MICLIC) in order to minimize that asset’s time in the Arcanian kill sack.

Restricted fire area (RFA). An area in which specific restrictions are imposed and into which fires that exceed those restrictions will not be delivered without coordination with the establishing headquarters.

—FM 1-02.1, *Operational Terms*, November 2019, page 97

“Guns, activate the RFA,” CPT Crafton ordered. It had been arguable whether placing an RFA over the planned breach was even necessary, but Dagger 6 wanted as many safeguards as possible.

The noise of TM Anvil and TM Cobra laying down suppressive fire plus TF Mustang’s own mortars masked the sound of incoming artillery. A battery salvo of 152mm shells shook D66 as if the tank were a rowboat in a gale, with a large dirt clod hitting CPT Crafton in the side of his combat vehicle crewman’s helmet (CVC) hard enough that he saw stars.

I need to go to open protected, he thought. Shaking his head to clear the ringing, CPT Crafton turned to take one last look at the breach site before buttoning up. He was pleased to see that the Longstrider element had come through the barrage unscathed. Looking past them, however, he saw a Green Platoon Bradley minus its right track, its turret still.

“Green One, Black Six, status report!” he said.

“Black Six, Green One, my three track is a mobility kill,” 1LT Warrington replied. “We’re going to need recovery assets.”

I didn’t even plan the recovery piece, CPT Crafton realized with horror. *I don’t even know where to begin—*

The sound of a dull explosion to the front interrupted his thought process. He turned to see C23, a plow tank, stopped at the edge of the minefield. There was no more artillery fire, the Arcanians either displacing or silenced by friendly indirect assets.

“Longstrider One, get on up here and get to it!”

The next 15 minutes were a blur. Initially, a sole remaining BMP-3 attempted to engage the MICLIC with its 100mm gun. The HEAT round missed the oncoming M-113 by a couple of feet. The six 120mm gun rounds fired in retaliation immediately ended the threat, then the tankers did the same with a towed anti-tank gun that fired from a closer position. The detonation of the line charge seemed to be a fitting crescendo to TF Mustang’s efforts to that point. The engineers moved forward to swiftly mark the lane, as the battlefield quickly fell silent.

“Dagger 6, Longstrider One. The lane is clear.”

“White, get your plow tank through there and make sure we don’t have another obstacle on the far side,” CPT Crafton ordered.

It was only when C23 moved painfully forward another kilometer that CPT Crafton was prepared to believe the breach was complete. It would be another half hour before TM Dagger fully confirmed their penetration of the Arcanian obstacle belt. As TM Cobra passed through Dagger, then past the blazing wreckage of the Arcanian mechanized infantry company, CPT Crafton finally realized what they had accomplished.

The war is over, he thought. We just set the conditions for the war to be over.



“Driver stop,” LTC Milner said, looking across at A66 to his left and C66 to his right. Night had fallen, and he had chosen the three vehicles in question for this task for a simple reason: Their gunners could be trusted not to spark an international incident.

“Sir, it’s just like Anvil 6 said, there are four BMPs sitting down at this side of the border crossing,” SGT Cropps stated, scanning.

Figures the Arcanians would do something stupid, LTC Milner thought. He keyed his hand mike, switching to the brigade net. “Iron 6, this is Mustang 6,” he stated. “I am currently set at PL BLACK with—”

“Mustang 6, Iron 6, I have been monitoring your net,” came COL Kendrick’s reply. “Warpath 6 has authorized you to make contact with the Arcanian element to your front.”

Of course he has, LTC Milner thought. *He’s not going to be here if it all goes south.*

“Well, SGT Cropps, if they start anything, you make sure to get a couple of them before they get any of us,” LTC Milner said.

“Right through the front of the vehicle, sir,” SGT Cropps replied.

Muttering a quick prayer under his breath, beseeching protection for the terminally foolish, LTC Milner put on his tactical equipment. After making sure his pistol was loaded, he slid off the tank and began walking toward the Arcanian vehicles. In the gloom, he noted the burnt-out husks of a pair of Bolcavian BTR-80s.

Poor bastards thought they were responding to just another border incursion, he thought, recalling the S-2’s brief so many days ago. *Didn’t expect to get blown to pieces at the start of a war.*

The turret hatch opened on the BMP-3 blocking the center of the road. A short, slender man nimbly climbed down from the vehicle, then down to the center of the road. LTC Milner stopped roughly 50 yards from the other vehicle, purposefully moving to the side of the road so that he was not in direct gun-to-target line of Mustang 66.

Like being 10 yards to the side is going to make Lucy any less of a widow, he thought, watching as the Arcanian approached in the dark. As the man reached 10 yards, LTC Milner opened the conversation.

“You gentlemen seem to be lost,” he said, then pointed at the burnt-out Bolcavian border station. “As you can see from the building over there, you’re currently in Bolcavian sovereign territory.”

It was hard to tell the Arcanian officer’s age or rank in the darkness. However, his body language was quite clear as he looked at the building, then back at LTC Milner, then at the BMPs behind him.

“This border has long been disputed,” he said, his English heavily accented but easily understandable. “My commander has told me where to come to.”

To his surprise, LTC Milner did not feel anger, but sadness, at the young man’s words. He thought of the men he’d lost in the week past. Of watching the medics climb onto C66’s still smoldering hulk to begin taking out the crew’s remains. Of the sheer destruction that had befallen TM Badger during the defense of engagement area (EA) Blackjack. Of Al Vraciu’s body being zipped up in a body bag to be evacuated to the rear.

“I’ve killed enough people to last me the rest of my life,” LTC Milner replied. “I don’t want to have to kill you or your men tonight, nor do I want to start a war that could possibly lead to the destruction of both of our homelands.”

LTC Milner fixed the young Arcanian with a stare before continuing. “But with God as my witness, my orders are to restore the border tonight,” he said. “So if you’re still here by the time I climb back up on my tank, then I will do my duty.”

For a brief moment, LTC Milner was certain that the Arcanian officer was going to say or do something aggressive. After a moment, the other officer gave a curt nod. “Perhaps we have made a navigational mistake after all,” the young man said. “I will check my maps.”

You do that, buddy, LTC Milner thought angrily.

“Thank you,” he said aloud. “We will wait here while you do so.”

With that, the two men separated and returned to their vehicles. As he climbed up Mustang 66’s turret and wearily slipped back into the TC’s hatch, LTC Milner heard the sound of several engines starting up. As he was sliding his vest and Kevlar back into the bustle rack, the lead BMP-3 pivoted around and began moving back across the border. It was followed by its companions, the Arcanian company arranging itself on their side of the border.

“You think this will stick, sir?” SGT Cropps asked.

LTC Milner considered the question as he regarded the border. “Yes, actually, I do.”

(See Figure 6-2 on page 110.)

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

- 1) What do you feel the most important fire support tasks are during a breach operation? Why?
- 2) How does a TF conduct MEDEVAC in contact?
- 3) Is TF Mustang's breach operation showing the signs of not having been rehearsed? Or are the losses what is to be expected from conducting operations against a near peer? Discuss your answer.
- 4) What are ways that a company team can deal with long-range ATGMs with limited friendly indirect fire support? Are there TF or company assets that can be employed to minimize the threat?
- 5) What is your unit's recovery plan for battle-damaged vehicles? Is it part of your SOP? When was the last time it was rehearsed during training?
- 6) What are the forms of contact that have been depicted in this chapter? What are other forms of contact TF Mustang could have employed?
- 7) Do you feel that there was adequate engagement area development done prior to crossing PL ORANGE? What were the factors present that may have affected TF MUSTANG's EA development? What could TF Mustang's staff and LTC Milner have done to better facilitate this process, if anything?

Epilogue

Bolcavia and its allies reached a ceasefire with the Arcanian Guardian Militia (AGM) effective 1200 the day after the deliberate breach. Task Force (TF) Mustang would remain in place for another seven months as Bolcavia, Arcania, the United States, and the European Union negotiated a permanent peace settlement and lines of separation. In conjunction with the United Nations, international peacekeepers assembled to monitor fair and open elections regarding the fate of Bolcavian provinces with a high Arcanian ethnic population. The Voloslav District's government went through great measures to redress some of the dissatisfaction with local and national policies during that time. Although permanent change remained to be seen, the results of the vote were 53 to 47 percent in favor of staying in Bolcavia.

Arcanian support to proxy militia elements began to wane in the face of threatened economic sanctions from the European Union and United States. A sudden drop in petroleum prices coupled with a surprising international crisis in eastern Arcania led to the AGM's de facto dissolution. Although there remained occasional violent incidents, there was no organized violence in TF Mustang's sector for the remainder of its tenure in Bolcavia.

A major reason for the TF's continued success was the leadership exhibited by LTC Milner and MAJ Santiago. Once it became clear that TF Mustang would remain in Bolcavia, LTC Milner, MAJ Fitch, and MAJ Santiago developed a training plan that both brought the unit's replacements up to standard while also serving to demonstrate the Mustang's continued combat abilities to the local populace.

In the 60 days after ceasefire, the TF leadership unit facilitated company level "lessons learned" huddles in order to codify what the battalion had just experienced. In addition to using these lessons learned to refine standard operating procedures (SOPs) in theater, MAJ Santiago prepared a TF document that helped identify gaps in training and equipment along with doctrinal recommendations. This was later published as a joint Combined Arms Center document entitled *A Task Force in Bolcavia* with annotations from the Center for Army Lessons Learned, Center for Army Leadership, and the Combined Arms Doctrine Directorate.

Upon TF Mustang's return, the Army quickly took steps to leverage the unit's collective experience across the Army.

LTC Milner was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for his actions during the Bolcavian conflict, then promoted below the zone to colonel 18 months after TF Mustang's return. He was assigned to the National Training Center as commander, 17th Cavalry Regiment. In that post, he would contribute to the Army's overhaul of the National Training Center and execution of its training processes. His experiences in Bolcavia were frequently used as discussion points on how to train, fight, and win. After 26 years of service to the Army and further promotion to brigadier general, he would join Lucy in a well-earned retirement.

MAJ Santiago recovered from his wounds and was promoted to lieutenant colonel. After being selected for battalion command, LTC Santiago returned to Bolcavia as part of the United States Army's recurring peacekeeping mission. From there, he continued to brigade command of a Stryker brigade combat team (SBCT). Like LTC Milner, Santiago took his experiences from the fight at Bolcavia and led numerous officer and noncommissioned officer (NCO) professional development forums to enhance readiness and tactical decision making.

CPT Crafton was awarded the Silver Star for his actions in Bolcavia. He was selected for resident Command and General Staff College (CGSC), then remained at Fort Leavenworth for further professional education with the School of Advanced Military Studies. This was followed by his assignment as a division G-3/5 (assistant chief of staff for operations) planner and BN S3. Later, he became an armored battalion commander in the same division in which then COL Santiago commanded an SBCT.

CPT Hernandez was posthumously awarded a Bronze Star with V-device. The people of Zhodkiva commemorated his and his company's sacrifice on their behalf with a small park and statue on the south side of objective (OBJ) PENNY. The new highway bridge constructed by the Bolcavian government three years after the conflict's end is known locally as "Cobra Bridge," with brass representations of the eponymous serpents welded to each bridge truss facing oncoming traffic.

CPT Wang elected to retire from the Army a year after he returned to the United States from Bolcavia. He loved the Army, but his near-death experience and continued aftereffects of his traumatic brain injury led him to believe it was no longer the career for him. Wang entered a master's degree program in international politics, then joined the Foreign Service with the U.S. Department of State after graduation. His first assignment was in the Middle East.

CPT Morris was found negligent of his duties as a result of the 15-6 investigation into his initial defensive preparations. In the aftermath of his subsequent summary court martial, CPT Morris struggled with survivor's guilt and separated from the Army after his return to the United States. Never feeling a part of TF Mustang after the conflict, he gradually faded from contact with his former comrades.

CPT Litvak was also selected for promotion to major and resident CGSC. She served as the operations officer for a Stryker battalion in Alaska, then went on to command a mechanized infantry battalion at Fort Stewart, GA.

The other officers, NCOs, and Soldiers of TF Mustang returned to the States and continued in their Army careers. Despite several book deals and projects that ended up in "production hell," the TF's experiences never resulted in a major Hollywood movie or television show. Still, 1-26 IN's legacy as a solid unit was often mentioned in the same breath as more famous units such as the 2-506th Infantry and 761st tank battalions.

To the last individual, the group members credited their success in Bolcavia to the battalion's leadership prior to the conflict. The Soldiers recognized they had entered Bolcavia with mental perspectives ideally suited for counterinsurgency. However, their training had given them the necessary mental flexibility to react to what stateside pundits had called "new generation warfare" against a hybrid enemy. Their opponents had used technology to degrade and disrupt many of their systems' capabilities, but in the end their attention to detail and upholding of standards in peacetime had allowed them to succeed in war. As time continued on and careers progressed, it was this central truth that they all returned to whether at personal meetings, official gatherings, or impromptu reunions. The proselytization of this simple fact would be their lasting impact upon the service that they loved.

APPENDIX A

Army Universal Task List (AUTL) Tasks

The AUTL tasks described in this publication include—

- Conduct Tactical Maneuver, ART 1.2.
- Conduct Passage of Lines, ART 1.2.8.
- Occupy an Attack and Assault Position, ART 1.5.2.
- Occupy and Establish a Battle or Defensive Position, ART 1.5.3.
- Overcome Barriers, Obstacles, and Mines, ART 1.6.1.
- Conduct Breaching Operations, ART 1.6.1.1.
- Conduct Gap-Crossing Operations, ART 1.6.1.3.
- Enhance Movement and Maneuver, ART 1.6.2.
- Conduct Countermobility Operations, ART 1.7.
- Conduct Reconnaissance, ART 1.8.
- Conduct Maneuver Support Operations, ART 1.10.
- Integrate Fires, ART 3.1.
- Employ Fires, ART 3.2.1.
- Conduct Surface to Surface Attack, ART 3.2.1.1.
- Employ Close Air Support, ART 3.2.1.2.2.
- Employ Air and Missile Defense, ART 3.4.
- Provide Combat Casualty Care, ART 4.3.1.
- Provide Medical Evacuation (Air and Ground), ART 4.3.2.
- Prepare for Tactical Operations, ART 5.1.2.
- Reorganize Units as Part of a Reconstitution Effort, ART 5.1.3.6.1.
- Conduct Public Affairs Operations, ART 5.7.
- Conduct Electronic Warfare, ART 5.9.2.

- Synchronize Information-Related Capabilities, ART 5.12.
- Conduct Civil Affairs Operations, ART 5.15.
- Prepare Fighting Positions, ART 6.6.1.2.
- Prepare Protective Positions, ART 6.6.1.3.
- Implement Operations Security, ART 6.10.
- Assault an Objective, ART 7.1.2.2.
- Conduct a Counterattack, ART 7.1.2.3.
- Conduct an Area Defense ART 7.2.2.
- Attack by Fire an Enemy Force or Position, ART 7.5.1.

APPENDIX B

Dramatis Personae

Task Force (TF) Mustang (1-26 IN) Headquarters	
TF Commander	LTC Joe Milner
TF XO	MAJ Fitch
TF S-3	MAJ Jorge Santiago
TF CSM	CSM Al Vraciu
TF FSO	CPT Wilson
Battle Captain	1LT Eric Goldstein
OPS SGM	MSG Gabriel Wolf
TF Plans OIC	1LT(P) David Mustaine
TF Plans NCOIC/Chemo NCO	SSG Jim Hetfield
TF S-2, Acting	1LT Franklin
TF S-4	CPT Bedford Beaudoin
TF SIGO	1LT Tim Holmes
Scout phase line (PL) Sauron	1LT Konnor Hendrickson
TF Engineer	CPT Geoffrey King

Team ANVIL	
CO	CPT Li Wang
XO	1LT Ken Loggins
1SG	1SG Charles Lockwood
1st Platoon (Red)	2LT John Farley
1st Platoon PSG	SFC Hector Valencia
2nd Platoon—Bolcavian (Purple)	1LT Sergei Borskho
2nd Platoon (White)	2LT Billy Farnum
2nd Platoon PSG	SFC Thomas Kruse

Team BADGER	
CO	CPT Morris

Team BANDITO	
CO	CPT Stephanie Litvak
XO	1LT Patrick Pattle
1SG	1SG William McNair
1st Platoon (Red)	2LT Yancy Warburton
1st Platoon PSG	SFC John Vogt
2nd Platoon (White)	1LT Franklin Rieger
2nd Platoon PSG	SFC Leroy Powers
3rd Platoon (Blue)	2LT David Myshall
3rd Platoon PSG	SSG Lucas Nollmeyer
4th Platoon (Green)	1LT Harold Leikness
4th Platoon PSG	SFC Clayton Huszar
MGS Platoon (Gold)	1LT Edward Deakins
MGS Platoon PSG	SFC Wilbur Bowker
Mortars (Anvil)	SSG Fred Donovan
Headquarters (Halberd)	SSG Gerald Koraleski

Team COBRA	
CO	CPT Juan Hernandez
XO	1LT Russell Dietze
1SG	1SG Dwight Gegg
1st Platoon (Red)	2LT Franz Depaul
1st Platoon PSG	SFC Jim Swett
1st Platoon, B/1-26IN (Green)	1LT Raheem Malik
2nd Platoon (White)	2LT Mitch Rogerson
2nd Platoon PSG	SFC Joseph Foss
Master Gunner	SFC Edward O'Hare
FSO	1LT Mikhail Robinson

Team DAGGER	
CO	CPT Gerald Crafton
XO	1LT Carlos Diego
1SG	1SG Roger Young / SFC Don Banks
FSO	1LT Nick Farmer
1st Platoon (Red)	2LT Dennis Brown
1st Platoon PSG	SFC Barry Barkhorn
2nd Platoon (White)	1LT Archie Maund
2nd Platoon PSG	SSG Raphael Zengel
3rd Platoon (Blue)	2LT Percy Dinesen
3rd Platoon (PSG)	SFC Namdeo Jadav
3rd Platoon, A/1-26 IN (Green)	1LT Steve Warrington
3rd Platoon, A/1-26 IN (PSG)	SFC Leonard Apiata

Other Units	
IRON (2nd BCT, 54th ID) CDR	COL Brian Kendrick
IRON 5	LTC William Halsey
MUSTANG LNO	1LT Tony DeMaio
GRIFFON 5	CPT Reginald Fisk
WARPATH 6	MG Tom Bolten

APPENDIX C

Acronyms

ADA	Air defense artillery
AGM	Arcanian Guardian Militia
AHA	Ammunition holding area
ALO	Air liaison officer
ATGM	Anti-tank guided missiles
BCT	Brigade combat team
BDE	Brigade
BFT	Blue force tracker
CALL	Center for Army Lessons Learned
CAR	Combined arms rehearsal
CAS	Close air support
CFLCC	Coalition forces land component commander
CFZs	Critical friendly zones
CGSC	Command and General Staff College
COIN	Counterinsurgency
CP	Collection point
CTCs	Combat training centers
CVC	Combat vehicle crewman's helmet
DTG	Division tactical group
EA	Engagement area
EOD	Explosive ordnance disposal
EPWs	Enemy prisoners of war
ETA	Estimated time of arrival
FIST	Fire support team
FOB	Forward operating base
FPOL	Forward passage of lines
FRG	Family Readiness Group

FSC	Forward support company
FSO	Fire support officer
IADS	Integrated air defense system
IBA	Interceptor body armor
IED	Improvised explosive device
JFACC	Joint force air component commander
KIA	Killed in action
LNO	Liaison officer
LOGPAC	Logistics package
LSCO	Large-scale combat operations
MANPADS	Man portable air defense system
MBT	Main battle tanks
MICLIC	Mine-clearing line charge
MEDEVAC	Medical evacuation
MGS	Mobile gun system
MND	Multi-national division
MPAT	Multi-purpose anti-tank
NAI	Named area of interest
NCO	Noncommissioned officer
OPSEC	Operations security
OSC	Operational-strategic command
PFC	Private first class
PL	Phase line
PPD	Personal protection detachment
RFA	Restricted fire area
RPGs	Rocket-propelled grenades
RSOI	Reception, staging, onward movement, and integration
RTE	Route
RTO	Radio telephone operator
SBCT	Stryker brigade combat team
SECDEF	Secretary of Defense

SIGO	Signal officer
SITREP	Situation report
SOF	Special operations forces
SOP	Standard operating procedures
SPOD	Sea port of debarkation
SPOT	Predeployment and operational tracker
SSG	Staff sergeant
TACON	Tactical control
TC	Tank commander
TF	Task force
TM	Team
TOC	Tactical operations center
TRADOC	United States Army Training and Doctrine Command
UAS	Unmanned aircraft system
UAV	Unmanned aerial vehicle
VOCO	Vocal order
WARNO	Warning order
WIA	Wounded in action
XO	Executive officer

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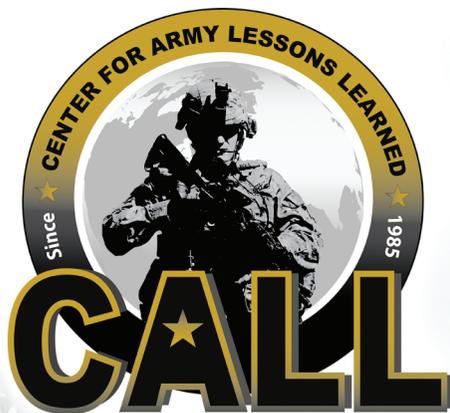
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