

## THE CAPABILITIES FOR USING A MECHANISED BATTALION IN A BREAKTHROUGH FROM THE ENCIRCLEMENT

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**Abstract:** *Mechanized battalions are the main maneuver force of the Serbian Armed Forces and the backbone of defense operations, due to their great firepower, human and technical potential, and maneuverability.*

*Combat actions, despite knowing the principles of how the units operate, are almost always sudden and are most often conducted in a blurry combat situation. A complex operation, such as a defensive one, can lead to an undesired effect, which is that the unit finds itself in the encirclement and is forced to make a break through, in order to complete the task and preserve the lives of its personnel.*

**Key words:** *Mechanized units, defense, encirclement, break through*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The encirclement and breakthrough from the encirclement in its classic manner has not been performed since the World War II in this region. The tactics and principles of the use of units are gradually being adapted to modern conflicts, which are mainly carried out in urban areas.

In the rich history of wars in this region, we have knowledge in the form of records and memoirs of prominent military commanders, mostly of those who fought in People's Liberation War in World War II and wars from 1991-1995. There are examples of this kind of combat activities, where units were encircled, and had to do a breakthrough, with more or less success, or more or less casualties. SO far, these examples from wars in Former Yugoslavia weren't studied in military schools, through tactics. There is no scientifically verified knowledge about the subject of the research itself.

In modern conflicts, the prerequisites for the execution of actions are: mass of forces, mobility, intensive use of modern technical and technological devices and assets, supremacy in air space, and asymmetry, which puts the defender in the position of having to constantly monitor changes on the battlefield, so as not to get into a situation to be surrounded by enemy. In these

combat conditions, it is necessary to constantly be aware of the situation in the operational encirclement and be ready to make timely decisions.

Encirclement can be viewed as part of a defense operation, as the worst case scenario, when a unit, due to poorly implemented preventive measures to prevent encirclement, comes into a situation of being surrounded, due to an insufficiently well-organized withdrawal. The specificity of the breakthrough from the encirclement of the mechanized battalion lies in the possible speed of the maneuver of armored combat vehicles, the combination of firepower and speed, with the skillful use of which we create an advantage over the enemy. Successfully making a breakthrough in a carefully selected sector, and according to the decision made by the battalion commander with a quick and high-quality assessment of the situation and quick decision-making, flawless organization of cooperation and organization of forces for combat is necessary.

## **2. CONDITIONS IN WHICH ENCIRCLEMENT HAPPENS AND ITS PREVENTION**

Mechanized units have the potential to effectively prevent the encirclement, by the enemy forces exerting the encirclement. Primarily, they engage from the reserve and carry out a counterattack in cooperation with the reserve, and are irreplaceable in closing the gaps; they are efficient in accepting the forces that have withdrawn from the battle, and they can very successfully, in cooperation with other friendly forces, but not on their own, lead the fight against airborne and paratroopers.

The unit or its parts may get encircled during combat activities in a defensive operation (counterattack, raid, etc.), or after getting wedged into the enemy's forces, if care is not taken to expose its own flanks. It is possible to get into encirclement even after withdrawal from the battle, during the retreat and the enemy's efforts to reach our forces during the pursuit/chase, they cut off the path of retreat, very often in combination with air landings.

The encirclement is, most often, a consequence of the unfavorable development of the battle situation on flanks and the rapid breakout of the enemy's armored units on the flanks and in the depth of own troops, in combination with air landings and nuclear strikes (Land army brigade Field manual, 2013).

The most common conditions in which the encirclement can occur are:

- breach of defense, fast and deep penetration of armored or mechanized units into the depth of enemy's defense with the use of airborne troops (frontal breakthrough with superior forces),
- when the defense is organized without direct support of neighbors, usually when the units organize the defense along the lines and with larger interspaces (especially if the tasks of securing the flanks and interspaces are not clearly defined, if the flanks are not fortified or covered with the fire-support system of the superior ),
- due to the unfavorable outcome of the battle of neighboring units or on the flanks, without organized cooperation and constant monitoring of the situation on the battlefield,
- when wedged into the enemy's battle formation by conducting out a counterattack, where despite success, there may also be a deliberate misleading up of enemy forces in order to act in the flanks or bring them into the encirclement,
- when the defense is organized hastily, without sufficient data on the layout, strength, intentions of the enemy, execution of obstacles, security of flanks and a quality of a fire system,
- by organizing defense in environment that does not allow full mobility of forces and maneuver in all directions (existence of partitions/obstacles or other similar objects in the operation zone).

As the encirclement does not occur suddenly, it allows the HQ and units to plan and organize certain procedures and measures in order to prevent it. In these cases, together with quality and skillful assessment of necessary preventive combat measures, the time for organizing those actions is a decisive factor, considering the speed of conducting modern operations, and the use of modern technology.

It is necessary to organize a part of the measures that are carried out during the conduct of the defense operation, for the purpose of prevention and reducing the consequences of the enemy's actions:

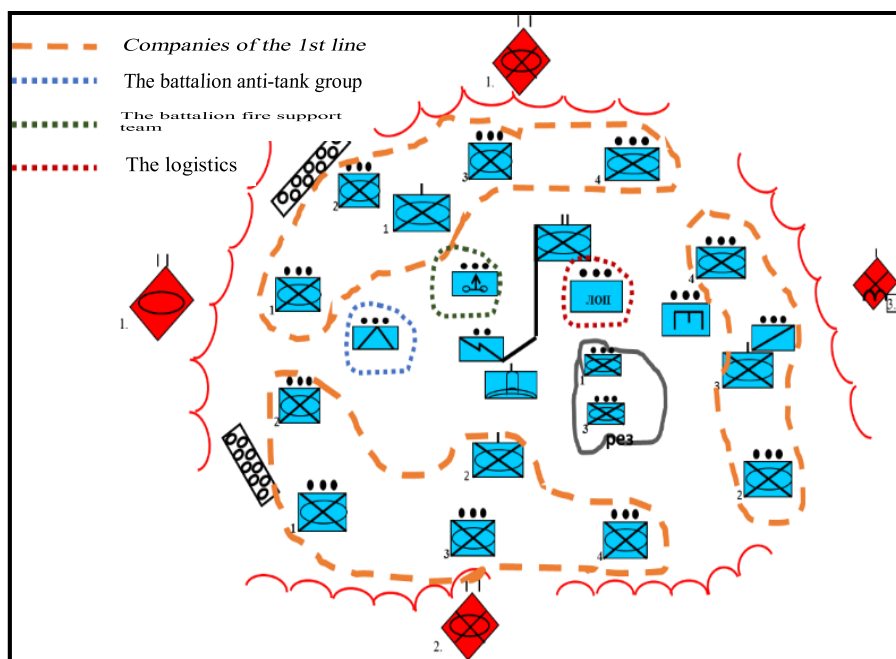
- intervention in the case of an unfavorable development of the situation in a certain direction, first with the assets of fire support, for anti-armor combat, and, if necessary, with stronger forces,
- performing active actions on sensitive elements of the combat deployment with the aim of disrupting the attack, inflicting losses and limiting maneuvers,
- monitoring and constant assessment of the enemy's actions for the purpose of possible deception and other actions,
- maintaining contact and monitoring the situation through the organization of cooperation with neighboring units in order to exchange intelligence data,
- timely and organized withdrawal, unless otherwise defined by the task.

If, despite the actions taken, it is impossible to avoid the encirclement, it is necessary to ensure that the unit threatened by the encirclement accepts the imposed situation as organized as possible or at least under the most favorable conditions.

### **3. ORGANIZING COMBAT FORCES FOR THE FIGHT IN ENCIRCLEMENT AREA**

Primarily, if unit is encircled, it should always accept combat and try to make a breakthrough. Further decision how a unit will make a breakthrough from the encirclement depends on several reasons, primarily on the task and goal set for unit. The assumption that the unit will be surrounded cannot be the only reason for leaving the area and position, as well as for not completing the assigned task. The basic thing that it undertakes after the encirclement is the order to switch to circular defense, that is, the defense of the outer part of the battlespace area where the unit is surrounded.

Initial success in combat in the encirclement is achieved by forming an appropriate combat deployment. It stems from previous actions, mainly defense, but it is specific in co-relation to the combat deployment in other actions, especially in the way forces and assets are engaged. The combat arrangement of the unit in the encirclement can have the same elements as in the defense organized in direct contact with the enemy. Most often it will be an deploying in one line with a reserve in the back.



**Figure 1.** Elements of the combat deployment in encirclement area

Source: (The picture is the author's work)

When grouping and preparing forces for the battle in encirclement, the commander also prepares the forces for the breakthrough, because regrouping during the battle is extremely difficult and demanding. All activities are directed with the aim of protecting own forces, assets and finding a suitable route and time to execute a breakthrough and merge with its own forces.

The elements of the combat deployment of the mechanized battalion are, in general (see picture 1):

**The companies of the first line** will be distributed along the edges of the encircled area unevenly and with a smaller depth, except on the routes where a stronger effect and manpower of the enemy is expected. Each company does its own obstacles in front of the first line end and in the intermediate spaces. According to the decision of the battalion commander, a part of the forces for anti-armor combat can be attached to the companies on more vulnerable routes.

**The reserve** will be of the strength of a reinforced platoon, formed from a company that was at the main effort in previous operations, and the task of the reserve is to close critical routes.

**The battalion fire support team** is deployed closer to the middle of the encircled area with the task of effectively supporting the action of the first line companies in all directions.

**The battalion anti-tank group** should be deployed the area closer to the most threatened routes, to defend possible advance of the enemy's armored forces.

**The command post** is generally placed in the middle of the encircled area or in a place from where it can successfully run the battle. The battalion commander with part of the HQ will be on the most threatened part of the battlespace.

**The logistics unit** forms stations and places them in a scattered manner in the middle of the encircled area.

The choice of the method of deployment of units within the mechanized battalion is up to the commander, his experience, knowledge and skill, and the most important factor is the development of the combat situation, the area of the operation, the possibility of cooperation with neighbors, etc.

#### **4. MECHANIZED BATTALION IN BREAKOUT FROM ENCIRCLEMENT**

The breakthrough should be executed before the enemy manages to form a full circle/ring around the battalion and strive to always be in the direction of location of our forces, in order to link with them.

The breakthrough from the encirclement can be done in one or more directions, with the aim of getting the unit out as soon as possible and with as few losses as possible.

1) Breakthrough in one direction is most often used because it allows a greater concentration of forces and impact of the breakthrough in the selected direction, optimal use of support forces and command during operation. Usually is done in combination with fake actions in the other direction in order to deceive about the actual direction of the breakthrough. Although by grouping the forces in one direction, the unit is exposed to greater danger from artillery and air attack from the enemy, this method is more effective. By implementing fake actions, it is possible to achieve surprise in the breakthrough section by quick regrouping of forces and choosing the section that the enemy least expects.

2) A breakthrough in multiple directions is used when the unit's freedom of movement is limited and there are no conditions for regrouping forces and breakthrough in one direction, or the pressure of the enemy is such that it is impossible to stay in the surrounded area. It is conducted out by subordinate units from their positions without regrouping and they have given tasks about the actions after the breakthrough, the time and place of gathering. In this way, it is likely to merge with its own units in smaller parts. The good features of this kind of the breakthrough are the scattered deployment and the distracted effect of the enemy simultaneously in all directions. The disadvantage of this way of breakthrough is that commanding the unit is more difficult than usual and the probability of success is low. Battalion commander will resort to a multiple directions breakthrough when there is no other way and is usually a last resort measure to prevent the destruction of own forces. Regardless of the chosen method, each requires proper preparation and organization in order to overcome all aggravating circumstances.

The choice of the method of the breakthrough will depend on the specific situation, the capabilities of surrounded unit, the available assets, and also on the position and the possibility of engaging friendly forces outside the surrounded area.

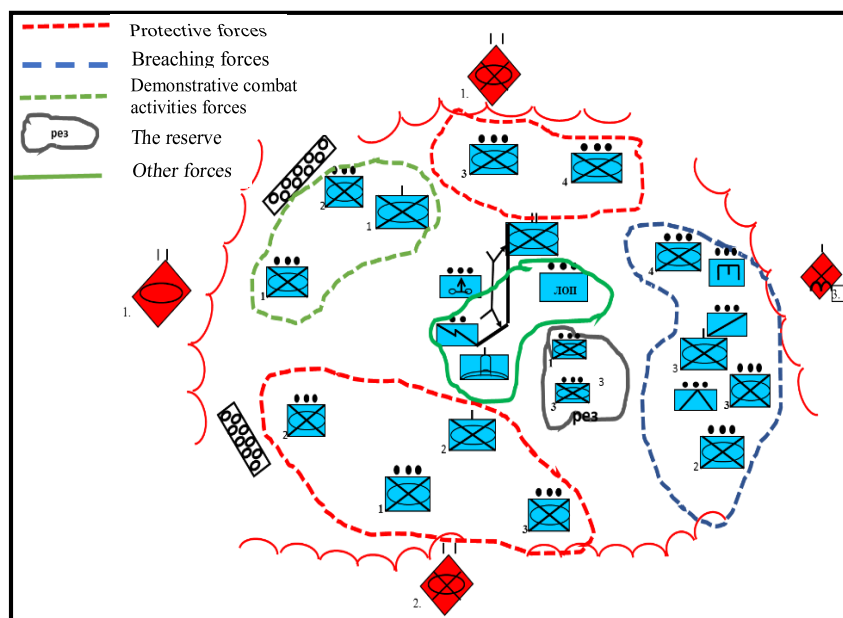
The preparation of a breakthrough is a very complex process, which requires great effort from both the battalion commander and the HQ to solve one of the most demanding situations for the battalion, in this regard, one should always strive to make the preparations in a timely manner and in the utmost secrecy, and the breakthrough from the encirclement is carried out in shortest possible time.

The preparations for the breakthrough include:

- selection of a direction and section of the breakthrough (one or more),
- selection of a direction (one or more) for a fake attack due the surprise,
- determination of the time for the beginning of the breakthrough-fake attack,
- the time and method of regrouping and formation of a combat deployment for a breakthrough,
- replenishment of units with ammunition, fuel and other supplies,

The timing of the start of the breakthrough and demonstration combat activities is extremely important for the success of the breakthrough. The best time for a unit to start breakthrough from the encirclement is at the very beginning. If the enemy is given more time, the conditions for a breakthrough will be increasingly lower, and the breakthrough success will mostly depend on the enemy's activity.

The breakthrough from the encirclement must be done regardless of the ratio of own and enemy forces. The strength of the breakout force will depend on how many forces are surrounded. In terms of choosing the time and place of the breakthrough, the battalion commander will have less opportunity to choose the most favorable one, but the concrete situation will decide that crucial role.



**Figure 2.** Basic combat arrangement of a mechanized battalion for a breakthrough from the encirclement

*Source: (The picture is the author's work)*

The breakthrough begins according as battalion commander ordered. By that time, troops have regrouped and a combat deployment was formed, and the units were issued precise and concrete tasks in accordance with the battalion commander's decision.

The breakthrough is preceded by fire support units towards the enemy in the direction of demonstration action. With fire support, demonstrative actions by certain forces begin with the aim of deceiving the enemy and diverting attention from the actual section of the breakthrough. By quick and sudden action with the support of other forces in the area (if any), the enemy is forced to concentrate forces in that direction and maintain combat contact.

After the enemy has reacted and tried to repel the attack, the fire support group transfers fire and tries to make as strong effect as possible on the borders of a encircled area, in the direction of the actual breakthrough section. With the fire support of the forces for the breakthrough, they hold up the assault position making short movements, and then make the final breakthrough. The fire support group protects the flanks with barrage fire and prevents enemy intervention. Other forces (HQ, logistics...) move after the breakthrough forces make final action.

After breaching the perimeter, the breaching forces widen the gap to the flanks and quickly withdraw. The reserve carries out security of the flanks, to ensure the passage achieved by the breakthrough. Demonstration forces disengage and move after breakout forces. Protection forces (which, with their own protection, are withdrawn to suitable positions and prevent the attacker from wedged into the surrounded area and disrupt the normal course of the breakthrough) protect the withdrawal of forces from the encirclement by preventing them from being cut off from the breakthrough forces and provide them from the rear.

After the withdrawal of all the forces from the encirclement, the protective forces are disengaged, making a backward maneuver, they gather on the move and continue moving after the breakthrough forces. The reserve still protects the flanks of the forces for the breakthrough, the passage and prevents the intervention and action of the enemy by the forces in the withdrawal.

After the protective forces have withdrawn from the encirclement, the reserve performs a realignment on the move and withdrawing its own forces. At the same time, they provide rear security of the movement of the battalion. The distance between the elements of the combat parts is reduced in order to separate from the enemy as quickly as possible.

After the breakthrough, the main part of the battalion moves, generally in marching order or battle order (with appropriate security) until it gets out of direct combat contact with the enemy, and then acts according to given task and specific situation.

In the event that the breakthrough is made towards one's own forces, the units towards which the battalion is moving and in whose direction it is making the breakthrough bind the enemy's forces by undertaking active actions that begin with the start of the breakthrough. If the units from the front and from the encirclement areas come into contact with fire, the merger is successfully carried out and the breakthrough is completed after the acceptance of all subordinate units of the battalion.

In order to merge with one's own forces, there must necessarily be a system of mutual recognition that must be planned to prevent the effect of one on the other, that is, to implement force protection measures through identification on the battlefield. May include visual signals such as marked vehicles, armbands, use of lights, weapon or hand signals.

If there is no merging with its own forces, the battalion is deployed in a certain area, establishes contact with the superior command, organizes and prepares for the next task in accordance with the superior's order.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

From all of the above, it can be concluded that breaking out of the encirclement is a complex operation that requires an extraordinary effort of all forces and constant coordination of their activities. In armed conflicts, it is necessary to constantly monitor the situation, so that there are no unwanted consequences, that is, an enemy movement that will put its forces in a more favorable position compared to ours.

Defensive operations require predicting the encirclement, beside main objective in operation, which is to prevent the enemy from occupying the territory, constant consideration and assessment of risk factors that may lead to the unit's encirclement.

The possibilities of a mechanized battalion in the modern way of warfare, which has changed in the last 30 years, are great, but modernizing the assets must keep up with time and technological development. The forces formed by the battalion must be equipped with more modern assets, for example wheeled vehicles, in addition to tracked ones, better and more

modern weapons and better individual equipment for a soldier on the ground. The composition of the battalion should also include modern surveillance means that can collect data at greater distances, and this means primarily drones.

Another important group of assets is the acquisition or modernization of fire support assets, which, in addition to the fire support of units, will have the ability to provide more effective support during a breakthrough from the environment.

Consideration of this type of combat activities is necessary at higher levels, where the use of helicopter and aviation units is also necessary.

The specificity of breakthroughs from the encirclement carried out by mechanized units is the speed of breakthrough, which definitely sets them apart from other maneuver units. Mechanized units in this occasion show their firepower and maneuverability in full glory, which makes them the basic maneuverability of the Ground Army and the Serbian Army as well.

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