



Ukrainian Combat Employment of the Bradley Fighting Vehicle

by 1LT Jack Lynch

In the face of a determined adversary, tactical innovations are often deviations from established military doctrine. Combat in Ukraine demonstrates this principle vividly, particularly regarding the employment of the Bradley Fighting Vehicle (BFV). Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 3-21.71, *Mechanized Infantry Platoon and Squad*, 15 October 2024, outlines doctrine for BFV utilization. The Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) adapted the principles found in U.S. Army doctrine and in some cases, deliberately diverged from them to achieve battlefield success against a superior enemy. This essay argues that the AFU experience with the BFV offers valuable lessons for U.S. Army doctrine and tactics, highlighting the need to prioritize adaptability and decentralized initiative within mechanized forces. By examining both U.S. Army doctrine and Ukrainian battlefield applications, this analysis identifies key areas where tactical innovation can inform future force development and enhance the effectiveness of mechanized operations. Armor and Cavalry leaders

should read this article to understand how to foster a culture of adaptation and empower subordinate leaders to exploit opportunities on the battlefield.

The BFV story starts with The Food Machinery Corporation that introduced the vehicle in 1981 to engage enemy armor, provide mobile fire support, and transport infantry. The U.S. Army fields several variants including the M2A2 Operation Desert Storm Situational Awareness (ODS-SA), M2A3, M2A4, and M3 (cavalry version). A 600-horsepower Cummins VTA-903T, 8-cylinder, 4-cycle, V turbo supercharged diesel engine powers the BFV and it carries a coaxial 7.62mm M240C, a 25mm M242 Bushmaster chain gun, and a dual tube-launched, optically tracked, wire-guided (TOW) missile launcher. The platform effectively engages infantry, light vehicles, and armored threats in both offensive and defensive operations. Its armor protects against small arms fire and shrapnel, and advanced sensors and targeting systems enhance situational awareness for the three-person crew and safeguard the seven infantry passengers. The BFV honors its namesake,

Former General of the Army Omar Bradley's, emphasis on practicality and soldier survivability. Ukraine's operational use of the vehicle reflects principles that diverge from ATP 3-21.71. This essay first examines U.S. Army doctrine, then analyzes real-world battles where the AFU deviated from a doctrinal approach. Finally, it concludes that tactical innovation should drive larger changes at higher echelons.

Doctrine

U.S. Army doctrine establishes a unified operational framework at strategic, operational, and tactical levels. Army Doctrine Publications (ADPs) define principles; Field Manuals (FMs) detail warfighting tactics; and ATPs outline procedures for lower echelons. For example, ADP 3-0, *Operations*, 21 March 2025, Chapter 3-4 defines combined arms as, "the synchronized and simultaneous application of arms to achieve an effect greater than if each element was used separately or sequentially." FM 3-90, *Tactics*, 31 July 2019, describes the tactical sequence of find, fix, finish, and follow through. Tactics reflect combined arms

principles, and ATP 3-21.71 serves as the primary doctrinal reference for mechanized infantry platoons and squads. BFVs are critical assets in tightly coordinated combined arms formations. This approach requires standardization, a common operating picture, and close coordination. This coordination enables the BFV to deliver infantry and mobile firepower as part of a combined arms team. In contrast, the AFU uses the platform in dispersed, semi-autonomous groups. ATP 3-21.71 prioritizes tightly integrated, combined arms actions. The AFU emphasizes flexibility, autonomy, and initiative at the platoon level. Ukrainian commanders often employ the platform for mobile fire support and to place dismounted infantry further from objectives than ATP 3-21.71 prescribes. Distinctive challenges faced by the Ukrainians drive this doctrinal divergence. These challenges include strained logistics, unreliable maintenance, and reduced manpower. The following sections detail ATP 3-21.71's description of offensive and defensive tactics, then

explicitly contrasts them with Ukrainian practices.

U.S. Army tactics center on synchronized layered fire support requiring platoons to operate within closely linked formations. ATP 3-21.71, Chapter 3-174, directs that offensive operations require mounted support elements to deliver suppressive fire coordinated with maneuver. This includes precisely timed shift fire commands to prevent fratricide and sustain operational tempo. In contrast, Ukrainians adapt by employing BFVs for independent breakthroughs, ambushes, and anti-tank operations, prioritizing flexibility and speed. Commanders task BFV-mounted TOW missiles with engaging armor targets. Junior leaders exercise greater autonomy in decision-making. This shift from centralized, combined arms actions toward decentralized, localized initiative, highlight a core doctrinal change.

ATP 3-21.71 directs mounted infantry squads to utilize the BFV to close on the objective and dismount at the last

covered position before assault. The AFU commonly dismount infantry at greater distances from the objective and use the BFV as a fire support platform. Ukrainian forces make this adjustment because they anticipate anti-armor threats. Their focus is on suppressing Russian positions before dismounting infantry. This contrast highlights ATP 3-21.71 emphasis on rapid and protected infantry deployment. The AFU prioritizes survivability and standoff fire support.

Ukrainian employment of the BFV in defensive operations, diverges from ATP 3-21.71, Chapters 4-14 and 4-15, which recommend positioning the vehicle in area defense or as support for mobile defenses. The AFU instead deploy the platform to support mobile anti-armor teams and conduct ambushes against advancing Russian columns, often using a single fighting vehicle for these actions. These tactics leverage the platform's survivability and mobility to disrupt enemy momentum. The BFV's combat effectiveness also boosts infantry morale. Ukrainian

Figure 1. Two Ukrainian Bradley Fighting Vehicles stand ready to execute their next mission. (Photo by Ukrainian Ministry of Defense)





Figure 2. Ukraine map with administrative regions identified. (Image by Central Intelligence Agency)

forces demonstrate doctrinal innovation and operational pragmatism by adapting the BFV to dynamic defensive roles. ATP 3-21.71, Chapter 4-88, recommends hull-down engagements within layered defenses. Ukrainian units employ BFVs as mobile fire bases and obstructions along key avenues of approach. Operational necessity drives tactical innovation in contested environments as this adaptation illustrates. Ukrainian forces integrate these tactics into their overall defensive campaign to create a strategic advantage through unpredictability and rapid response capabilities. These moves in turn complicate Russian strategic planning and execution. This approach highlights tactical flexibility and aligns with Ukraine's broader strategy of leveraging asymmetrical warfare to counter superior forces.

The BFV enables the success of combined arms operations by integrating infantry and armor to create layered defenses. The AFU adopted this model, prioritizing mobile defenses, ambush

tactics, and rapid repositioning over static formations. The AFU had limited time and resources that strained their ability to fully replicate U.S. Army training environments. The demand of rapid necessity instead of U.S. Army schoolhouse standards, created an environment of impromptu tactics. The BFV now functions as a mobile fire base, engaging Russian units from concealed positions and relocating to maintain tactical advantage. These adaptations suggest that future North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) operations could benefit from smaller, dispersed BFV sections. The M3 remains an effective platform without combined arms coordination. The Ukrainian approach potentially invites unmanageable risk such as the isolation of elements from the response of friendly quick reaction forces (QRF). Excessive autonomy for junior leaders could also lead to resource misallocation and fratricide. Overall, these adaptations demonstrate both operational innovation and the platform's

versatility in large-scale combat operations (LSCO).

The Battle of Robotyne

In 2023, Ukraine received its first M3s and rapidly integrated them into front-line operations. NATO instructors accelerated crew training. This enabled Ukrainian units to adapt ATP 3-21.71 to their operational needs. The late August early September counteroffensive that captured the town of Robotyne was the first step laying the foundation for the breach of the Surovikin Line. The Surovikin Line was a Russian echeloned defensive line integrating layered minefields, trench networks and mutually supporting strongpoints. It required deliberate breaching operations in which the M3 supported exploitation and eventual penetration. AFU used the vehicle's capabilities to adopt more aggressive and autonomous tactics, demonstrating the BFV's versatility and ability to reclaim contested ground.

The Kyiv Independent reported that the 47th Mechanized Brigade used the BFVs to transport assault teams close to enemy lines. The 25mm Bushmaster cannons suppressed Russian positions, enabling infantry to dismount and clear trenches with the protection of covering fire. Pvt Oleksandr Hlushchenko, a gunner, described how “the enemy’s anti-tank teams tried to neutralize us, but the Bradley’s speed and firepower gave us the edge in responding before they could strike”.¹ Such firsthand accounts underline how a vehicle often criticized in the U.S. has proven indispensable on Ukraine’s battlefields.

Ambush Tactics in the Luhansk Region

In Luhansk, AFU mechanized units employed the platform’s mobility and firepower to conduct ambushes in dense forests. The Ukrainian Ministry of Defense announced the destruction of several Russian vehicles, including BMP-3s and T-72 tanks. A Ukrainian

platoon leader recalled: “We set up along a tree line, waiting for a Russian convoy to enter our kill zone. The M3s opened fire with 25mm bushmaster cannons and TOW missiles, knocking out the lead and rear vehicles, trapping the convoy. We then dismounted and finished the rest with anti-tank guided missiles and small arms.”²

Ukrainian troops love the BFV’s reliability. Pvt Viktor Khamets, interviewed by The Wall Street Journal, explained: “We were advancing when Russian artillery zeroed in on our position. The Bradley took multiple hits, but the crew survived, and we managed to withdraw while continuing to fire. It saved my life.” Sgt Andrii Sokolov echoed this sentiment: “Knowing we have a vehicle that can withstand RPG hits and keep moving changes everything. It allows us to push forward with confidence”.² These accounts demonstrate not only battlefield effectiveness but also the psychological advantage the vehicle provides to the AFU. Comparing doctrine to practice

reveals how a vehicle designed for the Cold War has been adapted for LSCO.

Conclusion

The successful integration of the Bradley Fighting Vehicle into the Armed Forces of Ukraine combat operations provides a compelling case study in tactical adaptation. Despite divergences from the standardized procedures outlined in ATP 3-21.71, the AFU leveraged the M3’s inherent capabilities of mobility, firepower, and survivability to achieve significant battlefield effects. This adaptation, driven by logistical constraints, personnel limitations, and the unique challenges of the conflict, underscores the importance of fostering a culture of innovation and empowering small-unit leaders to exercise violence of action. For NATO, the Ukrainian experience offers critical lessons regarding the continued relevance of legacy platforms in LSCO. The enduring value of prioritizing innovation at all echelons of command is the need for doctrinal flexibility in the face of evolving threats. Further study of these adaptations will be essential to inform future doctrine, training, and modernization efforts, ensuring NATO maintains a decisive advantage in future conflicts.

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NOTES

1 Gray, Andrew. “Ukraine Right to Be Cautious with Counter-Offensive, Top NATO Official Says.” Reuters, July 3, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraine-right-be-cautious-with-counter-offensive-top-nato-official-says-2023-07-03/>.

2 Terajima, Asami. “Overcoming Setbacks, NATO-Trained Brigade Breaches Surovikin Line in Zaporizhzhia Oblast.” The Kyiv Independent, August 29, 2023. <https://kyivindependent.com/overcoming-setbacks-nato-trained-brigade-breaches-surovikin-line-in-zaporizhzhia-oblast/>.



Figure 3. U.S. Soldiers assigned to 1st Battalion, 16th Infantry Regiment, 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division maneuver BFVs to seize an objective during Rotation 25-04 at the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, Calif., Feb. 9, 2025. (U.S. Army photo by PFC Christopher Bailey)