BASES CLUSTERS

Displace, Disperse, Defend to Survive

By Capt. Jonathan P. Davis

Background and History

The 325th Brigade Support Battalion (BSB) operates in the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command region and supports an infantry brigade combat team through a variety of island-hopping campaigns, often in a jungle environment. During the battalion's train-up for Joint Pacific Multinational Readiness Center (JPMRC) 24-01, the 325th BSB identified an operational requirement to develop and exercise base cluster operations in response to several rising threats from near-peer competitors.

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The major challenge in exploring base cluster operations was that much of the doctrinal guidance offered little instruction on how base cluster operations should work in a brigade support area (BSA). Army Training Publication 3-37.10, Base Camps, provides information about larger long-term contingency operating bases rather than smaller tactical, short-term bases. During the rotation to the Leader Training Program at Fort Johnson in July 2023, members of the battalion received intelligence-oriented threat briefings that catalyzed research into increasing BSA survivability from existential threats, such as theater ballistic missiles and enemy-detection capabilities. The resulting concept produced during mission analysis resembled a decentralized multinodal disbursed support technique using three geographically separated nodes that contained redundant capabilities to support the operation. This was a viable option at the time, but later its shortcomings became apparent (defensibility, timeliness, and reactivity).

The battalion continued to refine the concept into a two-cluster design during the brigade's collective field training exercise. It would not be until the brigade's validation exercise, JPMRC 24-01, that the battalion would have the opportunity to exercise the base cluster plan. The battalion used a phased approach to allow the companies to quickly address shortcomings and operational oversights while adapting to the new BSA construct. The battalion initially established the standard base defense while waiting for operations to begin for JPMRC. During the first jump to the next BSA location, the battalion occupied an easily defendable area to test systems and processes. The area was large enough and compartmentalized enough that the 325th BSB's headquarters and headquarters company (HHC) and distribution company (A Company) could occupy one area, and the field maintenance company (B Company) and the medical company (C Company) could occupy the other area while remaining nearby. It was only then, on the final jump, that the BSB established two geographically separate base clusters. The BSB operated as two base clusters for approximately four days until it redeployed the BSA to the cantonment area. During those four days, the BSB continued to adjust the plan by disbursing sustainment assets (fuel, water, distribution, recovery, etc.) between both base clusters to increase operational survivability and further enhance continuance of operations.

The Final Base Cluster Design

The final design used in JPMRC 24-01 was simple and functional and maintained the ability to self-secure and promote efficient sustainment operations. The overall design of the base clusters was that a majority of the battalion administration and logistics operations center (ALOC) would occupy Base Cluster II, along with the field maintenance company and the brigade medical support company. Support operations (SPO) staff occupied Base Cluster I with the distribution company, the remainder of HHC, and a consolidated field trains command post (FTCP). Senior battalion leadership and additional operational enablers occupied one or both of the other base clusters for the duration of JPMRC 24-01. These enablers included a military police platoon (confinement), an explosive ordnance disposal section, a mortuary affairs team, the brigade ALOC, the brigade plans section, and a forward resuscitative and surgical detachment.

Base Cluster Placement

Placement of the base clusters requires a methodical and well-rehearsed plan to ensure success. Poor placement or poor site selection will cause one or the other clusters to be destroyed or severely isolated. During the military decision-making process (MDMP), the battalion staff decided on placement criteria that would meet the commander's intent.

There are six criteria for placing base clusters:

- The base clusters are far enough away from each other to reduce the presence of the BSA to enemy sensory equipment.
- The base clusters are close enough to each other to mutually support each other with security and sustainment.
- The base clusters are placed on opposing sides of a minor terrain feature, such as a spur, a hill, or a slope. This creates a natural defilade between the base clusters and reduces the

possibility of fratricide from direct-fire weapon systems from opposing base clusters. If a terrain feature is not available, leaders at all levels must ensure all sectors of fire are first established using requisite fire control measures, so as to note fire into the opposing base cluster. This inadvertently creates a dead zone in which base clusters need to use precision to destroy enemy forces who gain entry to this area. In JPMRC 24-01, this was resolved using increased presence patrols, anti-personnel mines along avenues of approach, designated marksmen, strategically placed target reference points (TRPs), and early warning detection systems borrowed from the military police.

- The base clusters are interconnected using an established road system, giving immediate access to the nearest main supply route or alternate supply route and between each other (if possible). In JPMRC 24-01, creating new roads was not timely and could have delayed sustainment for the rest of the brigade.
- The fifth criterion involves the geographic placement of each base cluster in relation to the strength of the BSA location. The BSA location should offer a natural or manmade strong point.
- The base cluster is placed in a way that enables the concealment of the BSA. As discovered during the train-up for JPMRC, the battalion did not have enough camouflage netting to conceal all tactical equipment. It became necessary to push all equipment into existing vegetation, which can be a challenge in Hawaii. Adequate vegetation resembles tightly woven mangrove forests and large swaths of open prairies. Enemy small unmanned aerial surveillance drones and other fixed-wing capabilities were frequently used to direct indirect fires and various chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear attacks on the BSA when ground infiltration failed. This also prompted the battalion to downsize mission command nodes to further reduce detection. It became impossible to tell which tent or high-back Humvee was the tactical action center (TAC) or tactical operations center (TOC) by the end of JPMRC 24-01.

Base Cluster Security

A major advantage to conducting the typical BSA base defense is that it can easily self-secure and reinforce, whereas conducting base clusters divides the battalion's base defense assets in two while also maintaining operations. To reduce the overall burden on personnel and equipment, the battalion staff explored other methods to self-secure while maintaining situational awareness and responding to imminent threats.

The first element they explored used a geometric defensive pattern similar to patrol bases. Two that were explored during the MDMP were the cigar and triangular methods. During JPMRC 24-01, the battalion used a triangular defense that consisted of three strong points interconnected by concertina wire and individual fighting positions. Executing this perimeter defense enabled the ease of flexing reinforcements and ammunition to the direction of attack from enemy forces while maintaining situational awareness. The BSA incorporated concertina wire obstacles inside and outside the perimeter, which further delayed perimeter breaches.

The most challenging element of the defense was the use of two base defense operations centers (BDOCs). HHC's command post (CP) served as the BDOC for Base Cluster I while B Company's CP served as the BDOC for Base Cluster II. B Company initially had a steep learning curve because they had not trained in BDOC operations beforehand. Each BDOC could heighten a threat posture for the entire BSA based on intelligence input. However, the battalion TOC decided when to release both base clusters from that posture once the threat had passed. Each base cluster developed and incorporated the use of TRPs, which were processed by the S-2 and approved by the brigade fires cell. Battle staff successfully used TRPs to destroy an enemy motorized infantry platoon that had attempted to overrun one of the base clusters in the later stages of JPMRC 24-01.

The battalion had also planned to use a listening post and/or an observation post but could not do so because of manning shortfalls and operational priorities. The battalion, however, made major gains in situational awareness by using local surveillance and reconnaissance (S&R) patrols early in the exercise. The BSA sent patrols out around each base cluster to detect signs of life and enemy weapons caches. Each BDOC chose random times and search methods, such as box and clover leaf, to keep the enemy forces from effectively staging inside the combined security area. Both BDOCs deconflicted S&R patrols with the battalion TOC to mitigate fratricide. Each base cluster also maintained primary and alternate entry control points at two of their three apexes.

The final and most important of the security considerations was the early establishment of brigade fires and other effects. These capabilities were often tied up in supporting competing brigade operations, placing the BSA lower on the priority list for support. Available maneuver, fires, and other effects included adjacent quick reaction forces, indirect fires, air weapons teams, and armed and/or surveillance drones. The BSA made it a habit of requesting any and all available capabilities for each enemy engagement. Some were approved, while others were not. In hindsight, if pre-coordination had been made for crucial operations such as a BSA jump, the battalion may have alleviated much of the consternation felt during those operations.

Base Cluster Mission Command Structure

Maximizing existing mission command systems and the redundancy of capability shared between clusters is crucial for effective base cluster operations and security. In the design phase of the base clusters, battalion staff task-organized mission command capabilities across both clusters. Effective use of mission command systems allowed for expedited command and control and enabled the battalion to rapidly employ its forces, mitigate threats, and push information to the collective, keeping Soldiers down at the lowest level informed. In several instances, battalion leadership overheard Soldiers and junior leaders discussing future operations among themselves. This was due to the incorruptible method of transmitting messages in plain text. Information integrity can be lost during voice communications due to a myriad of reasons such as foul weather, faulty equipment, or an individual's syntax.

Due to the threat of enemy detection and existential threats, the battalion decided to employ an admin net using digital means to manage 90% of information and data being transmitted on a daily basis. Systems used included the satellite-based Mobile User Objective System, the Windows Team Awareness Kit, the Android Team Awareness Kit, the Joint Battle Command-Platform, and government cellular phones paired with Wi-Fi using a virtual private network.

Electromagnetic signatures produced by frequency modulation (FM), or very high frequency systems, formed hazardous environments for the BSA due to its inability to displace in a timely manner and to avoid launched and dropped munitions. Communicating in data-based systems was done out of necessity. The goal of the BSA was to not only be hidden from physical view but from state-of-the-art electromagnetic detection systems, which could be used to direct all manner of fires.

When could units use FM comms? There were two instances when this could be done. One instance was when units were conducting ground movements in which a mounted element would continuously move from location to location, albeit once at a release point, and would need to reduce their usage to avoid giving away adjacent units' locations. The other instance was when the BSA was under attack.

The BSA adopted the mantra "silence, violence, silence" to necessitate timely communication with perimeter security, entry control points, BDOCs, and subordinate CPs. Once an action was complete, radios fell silent and resumed using data-based systems. Task organization and placement of units played an important role in effective mission command. The SPO tent, or SPO TOC as it became known, served as the senior mission lead for Base Cluster I. The SPO TOC was collocated with A Company, the logistics response force, and the

combined FTCP, which possessed much of the sustainment equipment needed to quickly respond to emerging requirements.

On the other hand, Base Cluster II consisted of the battalion TOC/TAC, which provided senior mission command for that base cluster, serving as the interlink between battalion and brigade. B Company, C Company, and the other enablers were positioned in Base Cluster II to drive all decision-making processes on future plans, dispersion, and threat awareness reporting. Maintaining situational awareness on downed equipment at the maintenance collection point (MCP) and dead/wounded personnel at the Role 2 within Base Cluster II drove decision-making processes on when and how to jump the BSA.

In BSA's grand design, base clusters operated synchronously to push and pull sustainment to the warfighter. Combat logistics patrols (CLPs) would originate at Base Cluster I with validation by the SPO TOC and tasked by the battalion TOC (S-3). CLPs would move to a rally point near Base Cluster II, pick up additional capabilities (field litter ambulance, wrecker, logistics response force) if required, and depart to conduct their mission. At the conclusion of their mission, CLPs would briefly halt at Base Cluster II, release any damaged equipment to the MCP, and turn over casualties to Role 2 care. CLPs would then return to Base Cluster I to reset for the next mission.

One Pitfall and Lessons Learned

When developing base clusters from their initial inception to their eventual implementation during JPMRC 24-01, planners overlooked one glaring problem early on: the inability to maintain base clusters over extended periods of time. During the MDMP, staff had mitigated many of the existential threats. They had concealed the BSA from ground and aerial detection. Staff had also achieved the electromagnetic signature of a few households' worth of typical cell phone usage. The BSA could defend itself from enemy attacks through well-established defenses and well-rehearsed battle drills. The problem surfaced only after the battalion had established base clusters following the third BSA jump. The BSA had also jumped into base clusters during the brigade's defense, compounding the issue. With manpower dispersed to two locations, defenders now had four additional perimeters to secure while continuing to provide sustainment to the brigade prior to and during its second offensive. Soldiers hit the limit of their individual stamina fending off consecutive waves of attacks at all hours across multiple days. To combat this, especially in large-scale combat operations, it is necessary to know when to flex between the typical base defense and base clusters when conditions are right. Doing this gives Soldiers and equipment the necessary respite to reset, refit, and rest during natural lulls in combat.

With regard to decisive action operations, base clusters could almost be seen as a technique used by the BSB during offensive operations to improve survivability and to keep the brigade base of support hidden from the enemy. Naturally, there are times in decisive action where friendly forces will transition from offense to defense and back to offense again. This offers the opportunity to transition to a base defense in which the battalion is collocated, enabling it to reconsolidate and reorganize in preparation for the next offensive.

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