

# THE MODERN OBSERVER: See, Sense, Strike – Smarter

MAJ LACIE HUTCHINS  
MAJ NICHOLAS BOWERS  
CPT COLLEEN A. GARGIULO  
SFC CHRISTIAN K. KASTRINAKIS

**T**he company had arrayed its forces throughout the jungle, recon assets out with forward observers (FOs) and binoculars in hand. Infantry lightfighters and their fire supporters combed the dense jungle anxiously scanning to see the next terrain feature. The company commander knew they had to find the enemy's forward reconnaissance, surveillance, and target acquisition (RSTA) elements. Squad leaders reported no joy. Forward observers unsuccessfully scanned their sectors with their direct line of sight assets. Local patrols yielded the same.

Frustrated, the company commander turned to the fire support officer (FSO) and exclaimed, "I need you to figure this out; we must see past the next ridgeline!" The FSO knew the answer: They had to find a higher vantage point. "Sir," the FSO replied, "we need to send up a drone to see over the next terrain feature; that is how we will see and sense the enemy without risking a patrol." The company commander knew the FSO was right and responded, "Execute."

This is not fiction. It is a vignette grounded in the evolving elements of how we must fight. From Indo-Pacific jungles to the rolling terrain of Eastern Europe, we must empower our forward observers (FOs) to see, sense, and strike in a faster, lighter, and more survivable way. The argument is simple: Integrating company-level drones with fire support

personnel provides beyond line of sight (BLOS) sensing, keeps Infantrymen engaging the enemy in the close fight, and reduces fire support personnel requirements in the aggregate.

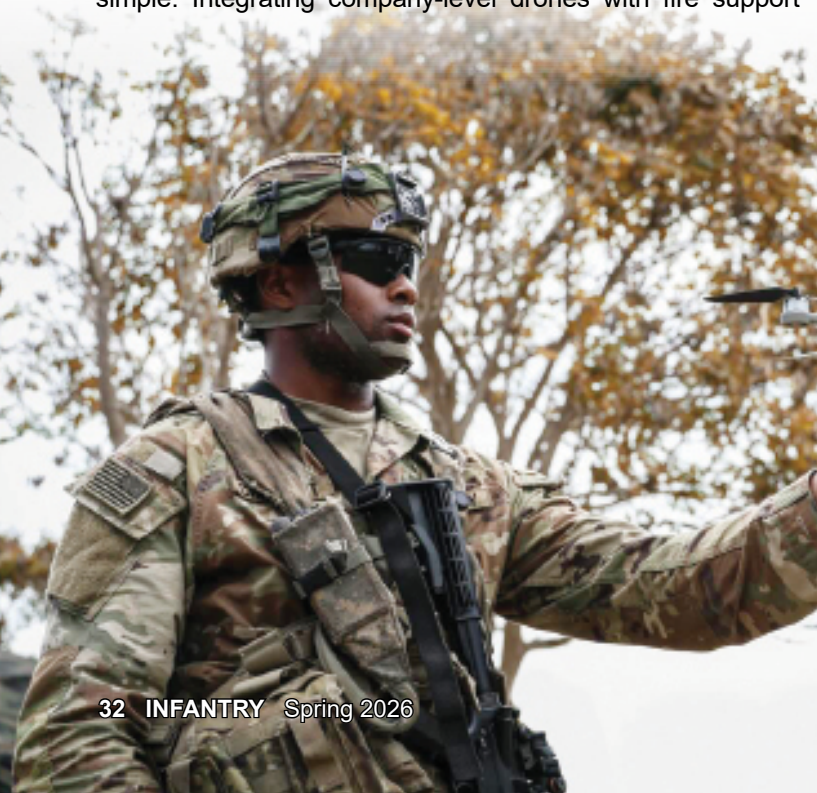
\*\* An aside: this article champions getting small unmanned aerial systems (sUAS) into the hands of FOs, but it does not argue they do not have a role in 11-series Soldiers for the purpose of reconnaissance. Reconnaissance elements and other maneuver formations require access to this technology to enhance battlefield awareness, survivability, and responsiveness. UAS employment must be synchronized with mission command; enabling this integration starts with clear guidance from mobile brigade (MBDE)-level commanders, who align tactical employment with operational fires priorities.\*\*

## Do Your Job

Today's modern battlefield is full of new technology. First-person view (FPV) sensors, short- and medium-range reconnaissance (SRR/MRR) assets, localized signals intelligence (SIGINT) assets, and common operating pictures (COPs) are more and more common — at echelon — every day. Experimentation continues, but the core functions remain intact: Army Soldiers must be able to see, sense, and strike the enemy with mass... enter the forward observer.

Through change, we must be vigilant to retain our core competencies. The 13F FO is the fire support representative for the maneuver platoon. The FO's primary duty is to accurately locate targets, then call for and adjust fire support.<sup>1</sup> The infantry company commander — through their company FSO — puts the intent for fires into action. The supported element — the 11B Infantryman — is the decisive maneuver element for the Army's close combat operations. The Infantryman's primary duty is to close with and destroy the enemy through fire and movement, or to repel their assault through fire and close combat.<sup>2</sup> The infantry platoon leader — through their squad leaders and team leaders — translates the company commander's intent into tactical action on the

*A Soldier in the 3rd Mobile Brigade, 25th Infantry Division launches a small unmanned aerial vehicle. (Photo courtesy of the 25th Infantry Division)*



---

ground. Integrating enablers like sUAS, robotic platforms, or mounted firepower allows infantry squads to extend their reach, improve survivability, and maintain overmatch in the close fight.

Keeping the sensing and striking in the hands of the 13F maintains the responsibility to locate and strike targets in the right hands. By providing 13-series personnel with BLOS UAS and drone feeds instead of walking hills with binos and radios, we return manpower to the line and still maintain fire support effectiveness. This does not eliminate the need for “all-weather” core competencies. We still require observers who can call a fire mission in degraded conditions, but we also need FOs who can do that and build a COP with their own drone footage. One drone, paired with a joint fire support team (JFST) and Precision Fires-Dismounted (PF-D), becomes a mobile, self-contained BLOS sensor-strike package — no separate radio-telephone operator (RTO), no external support. One warfighter, all the tools. That’s tactical efficiency. That is lethality. This is not an either/or solution — it is an evolution.

### **The Proven Result: Training and Doctrine**

Recent 25th Infantry Division training events provides salient lessons learned for both training and doctrine. Combined arms live-fire exercises (CALFEXs) utilizing several FPV and SRR assets yielded positive results. Through training we saw the most effective commanders put the responsibility of the intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) from drones in the hands of observers, ultimately simplifying their sensor calculus. The results provide lessons learned by the fire support community.

As we experienced in a recent CALFEX, infantry company commanders can get overstimulated managing their formation and the many tools at their disposal. The least successful commanders tried to fight their organizations from their Android Tactical Awareness Kits (ATAKs) and were unable to adapt to the situation on the ground. They felt that by employing their sUAS (specifically SRR) systems to look at what was right in front of them they would be able to anticipate the enemy’s actions. This was not the case. The lag between drones, operators, and the commander for decision delayed the process, and the situation evolved beyond their ability to direct (They were reacting by seeing a filtered feed and mistaking it for reality).

The most successful companies remained grounded in the basics while exploiting new technology. Commanders established themselves in a position to physically see and direct their units, enabling drone operators and FSOs to leverage fires to shape the next fight. By giving their FSOs or FSNCOs intent and guidance, it was on the fires element to identify and employ the right sensor to get rounds on target through whatever means was available. The fire support team (FiST) operated with autonomy, collaborating directly with drone operators and maneuver elements. They were updating the doctrine and tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) in real time.

Recent training shows immediate room for improvement in fire support doctrine. Three areas in Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 3-09.30, *Observed Fires*, are prime for updates. The first is observation post (OP) planning considerations. ATP 3-09.30 discusses two primary considerations for OP planning: forward and reverse slope.<sup>3</sup> Recent experiences show these methods are relevant but not all inclusive: The new OP may be in the palm of our hands. For example, what if that “location” comes from a drone on an offset hide site? What if we no longer need two 13Fs on every hilltop because one is flying, seeing, and lasing — all from cover? Or even further into the future — what if the observer can sense and strike with the same asset? OP selection is now different, and while we begin to train that way, we can quickly cover ground on doctrine updates.

A second example is observer control options. There are currently three observer control options: decentralized, designated, and centralized.<sup>4</sup> We need to develop more competent observers through training and the fundamentals found in doctrine. As highlighted in the article “The Meaning of Drone-Enabled Infantry Striking Beyond Line of Sight,” Ukrainian drone operators work in tight conjunction with indirect fire teams to coordinate effective fires and strike targets.<sup>5</sup> These lessons demand that 13F training be updated to include UAS integration, decentralized decision-making, and rapid fire control — pushing doctrine into the modern fight. Modern technological innovations like launched effects and armed FPVs lend credence to a fourth type of control: independent. The fundamental difference with the independent control option is the ability to see, sense, and strike organic to the observer. The argument for independent control option is simple: It is effective.

Finally, ATP 3-09.30’s guidance on OP planning is still grounded in physical observation — stating selection depends on visibility, comms, and survivability — but does not yet reflect digital or aerial observation platforms.<sup>6</sup> The implementation and utilization of hide sites was proven successful during CALFEX and other recent training, both within and outside of 25th ID. Hide sites are no longer mentioned in doctrine but offer solutions for utilization of sUAS from relative sanctuary. As we develop and innovate, we continue to learn and iterate more quickly; it is imperative our ability to update doctrine and TTPs keep pace.

### **Doing More with Less**

As Napoleon once said, “One cannot expect to make an omelet without breaking eggs,” yet our modern approach shows we can break fewer eggs by placing empowered observers at decisive points. Fewer tools. Better effects. Tactical efficiency.

As 25th Division Artillery transitions from Transformation in Contact (TiC) 1.0 to 2.0, we confirmed we can be more efficient across our formations to see, sense, and strike.<sup>7</sup> We moved FOs into multi-purpose companies (MPCs) and the mobile brigade-level reconnaissance element, taking them off the hips of their platoon leaders and putting them back in the

fight. Figure 1 displays a prototype FiST task organization.

The talent exists in our formations already, and if we task-organize and equip our fire support personnel properly, we are more lethal and ready. The technology exists. We must now provide it to our FOs and train them to solve the problem. Seeing past the ridgeline should not require a battalion S-2. It should be solved at the company level by an FO with a drone in the air, PF-D in hand, and fires queued in seconds.

**Conclusion**

Recent training across 25th ID and lessons observed in Ukraine make one point unmistakably clear: Our fire supporters must evolve now. Observers are no longer just a voice on the net — they are a multidomain sensor and strike enabler. As formations integrate small drones and digital mission tools at the lowest levels, doctrine must adapt to reflect this shift. Observer control options should expand to include independent control, and OP planning must account for standoff sensing platforms.

We proved this in training: Rapid, lethal, and survivable kill chains are possible when commanders empower their FOs and FSNCOs to own the sensor-to-shooter process. But this shift is not exclusive to the 13F. Reconnaissance teams, scouts, and other maneuver elements require access to UAS technology to enhance battlefield awareness and survivability. This evolution must be guided by MBDE commanders' intent for fires, ensuring synchronization of effects across formations. Maneuver commanders and FSOs alike need to keep in mind that while all the new technology can streamline their task, nothing will replace remaining grounded in the basics and seeing the problem firsthand.

While UAS enables maneuver providing real-time battlefield awareness, route security, and early warning to shape the close fight; it is vital to fires and our ability to support maneuver and allow the infantry to prosecute the close fight. The technology exists, and the culture shift is underway. Manning, equipping, and doctrine must keep pace. Empower the observer — and the fires will land where and when they matter most.

**Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 3-09.30, *Observed Fires*, September 2017, 2-5.
- <sup>2</sup> Field Manual 3-21.8, *The Infantry Rifle Platoon and Squad*, 2023.
- <sup>3</sup> ATP 3-09.30, 2-12.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-8.
- <sup>5</sup> Antonio Salinas, Mark Askew, and Jason Levay, "The Meaning of Drone-Enabled Infantry: Striking Beyond Line of Sight," *War on the Rocks*,

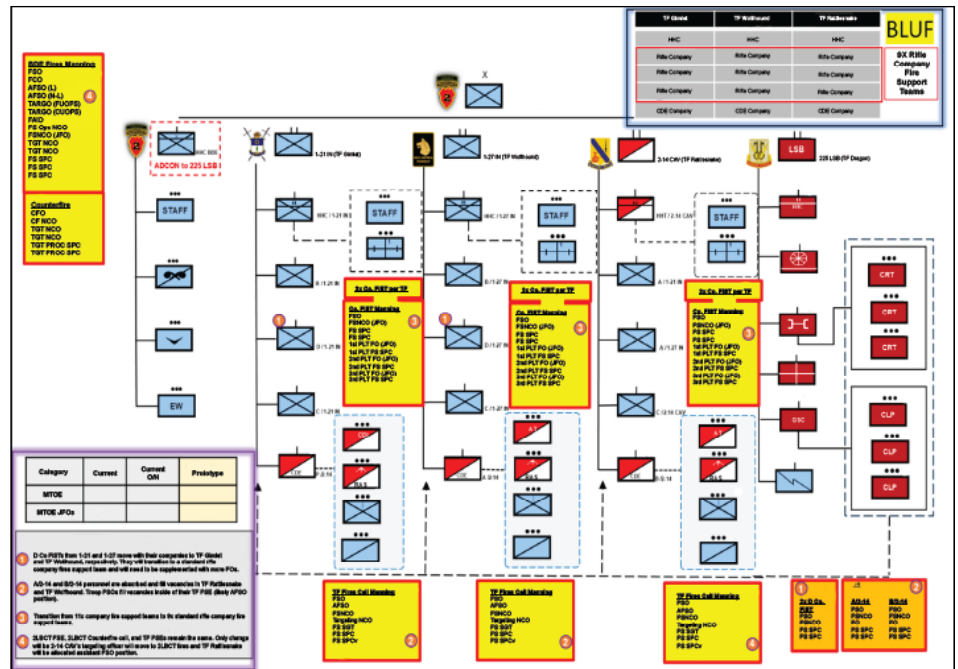


Figure 1 — Prototype FiST Task Organization for 2/25 MBDE

23 June 2025, <https://warontherocks.com/2025/06/the-meaning-of-drone-enabled-infantry-striking-beyond-line-of-sight/>.

<sup>6</sup> ATP 3-09.30, 2-13.

<sup>7</sup> CPT Colleen Gargiulo, MAJ Jack Wilson, CPT Michael Wilson, "Manning and Equipping to Win: Reorganizing the Fire Support Enterprise for Multi Domain Operations," *Field Artillery Professional Bulletin*, 3 September 2025, <https://www.dvidshub.net/publication/issues/75168>.

**MAJ Lacie Hutchins** currently serves as the executive assistant to the Chief of Staff, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command. She previously served as the mobile brigade fire support officer for 3rd Mobile Brigade (MBDE), 25th Infantry Division Mobile Brigade – 3rd Battalion, 7th Field Artillery Regiment (FAR), 25th Division Artillery (DIVARTY). MAJ Hutchins has served in numerous fires enterprise positions, notably as the lethal fires officer for 25th DIVARTY and battalion fire support officer for 1st Battalion, 27th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division.

**MAJ Nicholas Bowers** currently serves as the fire support officer for 3rd Mobile Brigade (MBDE), 25th Infantry Division. He previously served as the executive officer for 3-7 FAR and fire support coordinator for the 3rd Multi-Domain Task Force. His other assignments include serving as an observer-coach/trainer (OC/T) for 1st Army and Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Hohenfels, Germany. He also commanded Headquarters and Headquarters Battery, 1st Battalion, 9th FAR.

**CPT Colleen A. Gargiulo** currently serves as fire support officer for 2nd Battalion, 35th Infantry Regiment, 3/25 MBDE. She is the first in Army aviation history to successfully transmit live drone feed from both long- and short-range reconnaissance assets directly into the AH-64 cockpit for targeting acquisition from her fire support team, revolutionizing sensor-to-shooter integration. Previously, she served as a battalion fire direction officer and as a platoon leader for 1st Battalion, 5th FAR, 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division; and as a battery fire direction officer at 2nd Battalion, 319th Airborne FAR, 2nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division.

**SFC Christian K. Kastriakis** currently serves as the fire support NCO for 3/25 MBDE. He previously served as the battalion fire support NCO for 2-35 IN, where he significantly contributed to efforts in integrating sUAS with forward observers, scouts, mortars, and AH-64s. Formerly, he has served as a battalion fire support NCO with 1st Security Force Assistance Brigade, a company fire support NCO, and a platoon forward observer with 1st Battalion, 28th Infantry Regiment.