

Infantry

Winter, 2025-2026

CLOSE FIGHTING FUNDAMENTALS

Headquarters, Department of the Army
Approved for public release; distribution is unlimited
PB 7-25-4

Close Fighting Fundamentals:

Tactical-Level Training Considerations to Prepare for Uncertain Future Battlefields

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Editor's Note: *This article was adapted from LTG Anderson's Command Note #7 — Enduring Training Guidance Supplemental. Although it was written for XVIII Airborne Corps Soldiers, LTG Anderson provides valuable insights that can benefit all Infantry leaders as they plan and execute training.*

The XVIII Airborne Corps will be called to fight, with little advance warning, to a conflict and an enemy for which we do not yet know. Presently, we do not have the clarity, precision, or detail in war plans and contingency plans to know specifically what tasks to train for or what conditions to train against. **As such, our Corps needs to possess strong teams, leaders that can think, a mastery of basic skills, and excellence in night fighting to hedge against the uncertainty and full spectrum of what we could (and will) be called to execute.** This article is meant to help you visualize the types of skills we need to develop at the tactical level as part of the hedge against uncertainty. **THIS IS NOT TRAINING GUIDANCE FOR FIRE TEAMS, SQUADS, and PLATOONS.** It is based on my experience and thus has a strong light infantry flavor to it, but if we are going to fight in small units, decentralized, and potentially isolated, then it applies across the entire formation. **As we look to fix training management at echelon, I encourage you to develop your visualization of what**

you want your formation to train towards. Be it artillery tables, forward arming and refueling point (FARP) operations at night, expeditionary logistics, military police (MP) security missions, chemical decontamination, or unmanned breaching operations, commanders must be able to visualize and then describe the training end state to subordinates for them to have a shared reference point as they plan and execute training. After you read this supplemental, ask yourself if it helped you visualize what our training outcomes should look like to be ready for combat. This is “my” description of what I want our formations who might engage in close fighting to be able to achieve, be it infantry, engineers, logistics convoys, or while defending a perimeter in the Corps rear area. **Again, this is not guidance; it is a supplemental reference for your consideration as you set out to train your units for uncertainty.**

I first wrote this as a battalion commander in March of 2011 as 2nd Battalion, 87th Infantry Regiment set off to fight the Taliban along the Arghandab River Valley in the Zhari District of Kandahar Province, Afghanistan. The original version was based upon nearly 20 years of experience in light infantry operations. This version is essentially the same with some additional context, because modern large-scale combat operations (LSCO) are going to drive all forma-

Soldiers from the 2nd Mobile Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division engage targets during Operation Lethal Eagle 25.1 at Fort Campbell, KY, in March 2025. (Photo by SPC Alexander Goff)



tions to be able to fight at close range in complex terrain. **Knowing what you want your formation to be able to do is the first step to getting your training methodology correct.** Much of what I outline here, comes directly from the team leaders, squad leaders, platoon sergeants, and first sergeants that taught me over the years as well as my own experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. **None of this is original thought on my part; 99 percent of it was taught to me by NCOs. NCOs that were, without question, WARFIGHTING EXPERTS.** The fundamentals of close combat and direct fire contact do not change even if some of our tools do.

Light infantry is best suited to fight in the complex and restrictive terrain of mountains, urban areas, forests, jungles, and terrain that restricts ground mobility and line of sight, presents numerous obstacles, and prohibits long-range engagements (300 meters and beyond). **Our formations must be trained to fight at close ranges (0-300 meters).** We must be able to react, engage, control fires, and move more quickly and more effectively than our enemy within these 300 meters. It will be violent, stressful, and nerve wracking. Training will help mitigate this. Focus our live-fire training and situational training exercises (STXs) to develop mastery at short-range direct fire engagements. Our task is to become better at it than anyone we might face. We have a lot of work to do to get there. I wrote this note for the fighting we knew we would face in the labyrinth of walls, canals, grapefields, huts, and orchards of Zhari. But these procedures are applicable to any enemy we could face along the spectrum of combat, and the fundamentals apply to any formation, not only infantry.

Our weapons, night-vision goggles (NVGs), communications, ISR (intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance), optics, lasers, and small unmanned aerial systems (UAS) give us advantages in close-range direct engagements, but they DO NOT replace the need for fundamental fighting skills. Technology serves to enhance our capabilities as we execute FUNDAMENTALS better and faster than the enemy. Don't think for a minute that technical improvements will ever replace the need for a strong foundation in drills at the team and squad levels. **I expect NCOs and company-grade officers to drive this development within their training plans regardless of branch, unit, or mission.** Up-close direct fire engagements and fighting is a historical strength of the American Warrior. For much of our history, the ambush (learned from Native Americans) was the decisive engagement fought by small units, decentralized, and led by young leaders. The ambush is still a perfectly valid task and is great for training these fundamentals. Use our robust simulations capabilities to drill these procedures, and weekly battle drills after physical training (PT) start to build reflexive "muscle memory" and confidence without the need to go to the field. Drill, drill, drill, but do every drill to the highest standard. Remember, practice does not make perfect. Perfect practice makes perfect.



A Paratrooper assigned to 2nd Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, launches an RQ-28A quadcopter drone during Panther Avalanche at Fort Bragg, NC, on 27 July 2024. (Photo by PFC Jayreliz Batista Prado)

Close Combat Direct Fire Contact Fundamentals:

- The enemy will array himself to maximize his protection using terrain, vegetation, and natural and man-made features. The enemy has carefully thought through how to protect himself from you before he decides to engage. Use of buildings, canals, berms, walls, dead space, bunkers, evasion routes, and mines are all part of his calculus before he picks the point of engagement. Think through this as you go through mission planning, rehearsals, fires planning, employment, and route and formation selection. Find the enemy with UAS or other sensors and reconnaissance and **work smartly to prevent him from getting off the first shot at you.**
- The enemy will be VERY hard to see. You will detect him by the smoke coming off the barrel of his weapon, muzzle flash, dust, sound, or lateral movement. Listening is a great way to zero in on the enemy. When possible, use hand-and-arm signals to point out the enemy. **Yelling the distance and direction up and down the formation usually only helps the enemy pinpoint your entire formation.** Consider using hand-and-arm signals.
- Discard the "pop-up" target marksmanship mentality that our training creates. Create appropriate habits for firing into likely or suspected enemy positions based upon enemy signatures and what the terrain presents.
- During the engagement everyone will be under stress caused by fatigue, fear, and confusion. This reaction is

natural. NCOs and officers, your example under stress will be mimicked by your Soldiers. Be patient, collect yourself, get down low, and think. Show them the proper example of dealing with this stress and your Soldiers will rally around it. Practice this in training!

- Direct fire contact is often initiated without commands from a squad or platoon leader. Team leaders immediately take charge. Establish a base of fire and the rest of the squad and platoon will fall into line with the base team and build fire superiority from that point on. Rehearse this action until everyone can do it in their sleep. **Speed matters** in react to contact. You are in a race with the enemy to build fire superiority.

- Expect and rehearse enemy contact from a **flank or from the rear** of the formation, not only the front.

- Remember to rehearse fire control and distribution. There will be times to mass the fire of a squad or a platoon against a point target, and then rapidly distribute the fires across a wider canal line or a trail. You must do both quickly and with minimal commands (rehearse this until you can do it cold). Don't forget to use high explosives (HE) to hit the dead space as you distribute fires across the breadth and **DEPTH** of an engagement. **The ability to mass fires faster than the enemy can break the enemy's spirit, while sporadic, ineffective fires will only embolden him.** Fire commands and fighting in wedges get us to where we want to be.

- **Night combat gives the attacker a psychological advantage by magnifying the defender's doubts and fear of the unknown. Train to minimize the difference between day and night tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs). Maintain formations and dispersion and fire control measures at night.** We must be just as effective at night as we are in the day. NVGs and lasers give us an

advantage; learn to use lasers to employ fires and control distribution. The enemy will have NVGs, but if you can move and control fires under NVGs faster than the enemy, you have the advantage.

- In complex and restrictive terrain, fires alone will not be decisive. When fires cannot eliminate the enemy, we must use fire and movement. **Train our leaders to understand the difference between fire and movement and fire and maneuver.** It is an important distinction.

- o **Fire and movement** is nothing more than moving forward (or backwards if breaking contact) — towards the enemy — while maintaining suppressive fire to prevent the enemy from returning fire on you. Fire and movement is done at the fire team through platoon level. Sometimes moving forward is the best option, if you suspect the enemy has mines or secondary ambushes protecting his flanks. Don't blindly default to flank attacks; think and see the fight.

- o **Fire and maneuver** is the blending of fire and movement across a broader area to gain a position of advantage relative to the enemy (like an assailable flank or a breach). Fire and maneuver can only occur after the proper conditions have been set: The element that makes first contact must gain fire superiority BEFORE we consider maneuvering against the enemy position.

React to Contact

Return fire immediately — usually within the first three seconds. **Don't wait for the enemy to stand up and show himself before you engage him because he won't.** This is why it is so important to train our Soldiers to engage known, likely, and suspected enemy locations, or we will not be able to gain fire superiority and the initiative. All you need is a general direction of the enemy and to maintain constant awareness of

the other fire team member's fire by fighting in true wedges. **Fire team leaders — your personal actions are critical in the react-to-contact drill.** If you are in a correct wedge with the team leader at the apex, your Soldiers will fire at what they see you firing at without the need for a command or the need to turn eyes and heads away from shooting the enemy... lead the way!

Fire Superiority

The only way to close with and destroy the enemy is to prevent him from returning effective fire. Most of the time, we will not be able to identify all the enemy positions

A 101st Airborne Division Soldier engages during a combined arms live-fire exercise at Fort Campbell. (Photo by SGT Jewell Fatula)



until we are on top of them, especially at night. Consider conducting fire and movement until we find his positions or can identify an enemy vulnerability. Use direct and indirect fires to fix the enemy in place. Once you reach this point, consider shifting to fire and maneuver to exploit his weakness BEFORE he can react. The volume of fire should be such that the enemy cannot move or return effective fire. **Remember to use combat patience and develop the fight as the enemy reveals his positions and then either mass OR distribute fires accordingly.** Fire at the enemy from multiple angles and directions... no linear pitched firefights. Being shot at is stressful; being shot at from multiple directions is terrifying and confusing. Break his will.

Do not waste huge amounts of small arms ammo firing into structures or buildings (sadly, we do this all the time in training) because it's the only target we can see; you won't get any effects against the enemy and you will only reveal yourself to him. It doesn't take long in a firefight for the enemy to figure out how to get out of the way of our fires. The intent of our suppressive fires includes keeping him from moving away. Most of the killing will be done with HE weapons — 40mm, AT-4, hand grenades, and mortars. You may be familiar with the adage "fix him with ball and kill him with HE."

Don't "predetermine" the effectiveness of our fires based on noise or volume; rather, place yourself in a position to see and feel the effectiveness of our fires BEFORE we engage in maneuver.

Assault

We will seldom, if ever, know the full enemy disposition until we move right up on them. This is why our react-to-contact battle drill FOLLOWED by fire and movement is so important. **Speed relative to the enemy matters, integrity of team and squad formations matters, and rates of fire matter in close in direct fire engagements.** The chances of actually seeing enemy "targets" are remote; we can expect to fire and move on sounds, muzzle flashes, and puffs of smoke only. We won't know for sure what we are engaging until we overrun his position.

We often train squads and fire teams to "take out" a two-man observation post (OP), but there will never be only two men in a lone position that is not supported by fires of other enemy elements. Don't try to turn this "training procedure" into a tactic. **Don't fight fairly... fight your entire element, not merely the lead team or squad.** Massing the fires of a squad or even a platoon on a two- or three-man position is a good idea, because there are more enemy coming...



Soldiers in 2nd Battalion, 14th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division, run through the breach point during training at the Joint Readiness Training Center at Fort Polk, LA, on 15 August 2025. (Photo by SPC Mariah Aguilar)

Assault ALL THE WAY THROUGH the objective to the next piece of defensible terrain. This means using fire and movement all the way across until there is no more resistance. You can be sure the enemy has forces beyond what we can see with our naked eyes (front, flanks, and rear). Get small UAS systems up immediately and start looking for them as you secure and transition to defending the objective.

Successful assaults depend upon a high volume of accurate fire against known, likely, and suspected enemy positions AND violence of action. In training we often make the mistake that the closer we get to the objective, the LESS we fire — largely because of "targetry" limitations. **In close-in engagements, you must do the opposite. The closer we get, the more we must fire... again the idea is to break his will as you enter to within hand grenade range or closer.**

Individual Movement Techniques

You know the three basic techniques — low crawl, high crawl, and rush. In training, we normally use rushes, but once enemy rounds start flying back at us, the most common techniques will be low and high crawling (so train this way). It is easier to fight and command and control using rushes, but the enemy will seldom let us do it. Leaders will have to learn to "lead" from their bellies.

Never move on the enemy unless you can keep him from shooting back at you. We typically do this poorly because we are impatient and move too fast. Take your time.

Support by Fire (SBF)

Our rate of fire must be such that it prevents the enemy from moving or returning effective fire, but never fire so much that you run out of ammo. If you are in danger of this happening, you are either firing too much or the support element is too small to do the job. Rates of fire change as events occur; there is an initial high volume to gain fire superiority. Next, the rate slows to conserve ammo while the assault element moves into position; then there is an increase in the volume of fire when the assault element closes in on the enemy. And finally, there is a lift **OR** a shift to targets of opportunity as the assault element takes the fight.

Team leaders lead by their personal example. Lay elements into position using wedges (including crew-served weapons) with team leaders positioned forward so everyone behind them can see what they are doing. When you fight in a linear formation, team leaders and Soldiers often turn their heads (away from the enemy) to look to see what others are doing. **AVOID THIS.** Keep your focus on the enemy and trust your formation and peripheral vision to see what your teammates and team leader are doing to your left and right. This simple TTP also cuts down on the need for voice commands (which are almost impossible to hear once the shooting starts).

The support-by-fire element is responsible for ensuring that we do not mask fires. The assault element may have to move where it will mask the support's fires — they may not have a choice based on the enemy disposition. When this occurs, the SBF element must either shift fires **OR** move to a new location to support the assault and prevent masking. If an element can no longer shoot because the assault element is in their line of fire, they must move to a place where they can fire. **Remember... fire on the enemy from multiple angles and directions.**

Linear Terrain Features and Open Areas

Irrigation canals, tree lines, walls, trenches, pastures, courtyards, and intersections are dangerous places. This is where the enemy will inflict casualties on us. Overwatch elements, small unit movements, smoke employment, grenades, and setting in mortars to respond immediately are all means to set conditions to reduce risk to the force. When you come upon these terrain features **BE PATIENT.** Set the team and the overwatch and the fires scheme **BEFORE** you make a move. Patience and fire superiority matter. **Do not move unsupported!**

Pre-Combat Checks and Rehearsals

Asking a Soldier if he is "good to go" because he is "experienced" is wrong. **Everyone needs to be checked — period.** Always check weapons; function checks of weapons are a leader duty. Rehearse key tasks and battle drills. This is part of mission preparation and **CANNOT** be overlooked.

High Explosives

The psychological effects of these weapons are devast-

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ing. Nothing will break the enemy faster than effective employment of HE — this includes everything in our arsenal: 40mm, AT-4, MK-19, Carl Gustafs, grenades, and **especially mortars.** Carefully planned use of HE is critical to fixing the enemy and allows the formation to conserve ball ammo for the close fight. HE is what busts open his prepared positions, and HE is what kills the enemy inside of them.

Master Weapons and Crew Drill

The most common cause of weapons malfunctions is improper immediate action. We must drill immediate and remedial action until we can do it without conscious thought. Magazine/belt changes must be second nature and executed without conscious thought.

Consolidation and Reorganization

These are two **DISTINCT** actions that must be treated that way. Consolidation is security and preparation for the enemy counterattack or counter action. Consolidation happens after **EVERY** engagement, offensive or defensive, no matter how quickly we are trying to move off an objective. Consolidation includes ensuring:

- Everyone has a good fighting position with cover and concealment
- Everyone has designated fields of fire
- M320s are emplaced to cover dead space and support the machine guns
- All sectors interlock, flanks are tied in
- High-speed avenues of approach are covered with appropriate weapons
- Indirect fire plans are set and/or adjusted as necessary
- Fresh magazines/drums/belts are loaded and ammo is redistributed

Every Soldier and leader has to do these things immediately after the last resistance is eliminated and **BEFORE** reorganization begins.

Reorganization is POW and search, casualty treatment and evacuation, finding lost equipment, and conducting re-supply. Some tasks should occur simultaneously. The enemy will counterattack or at a minimum use drones, mortars, rockets, or artillery against your position. You must move smartly and efficiently to get all of this done, but exercise patience; be deliberate about it.

Communications

Treat comms like it is life or death. Don't ever give up on it — there is always a way to communicate. When not in contact, speak quietly and keep the volume low. When in contact, talk in a normal tone. Screaming into the handset to overcome battlefield noise only distorts your voice, makes you unreadable, and gives your Soldiers the impression that you have lost control.

Radios are NOT an effective way to control squads and fire teams during fire and movement. Team leaders use their positioning, personal example, and hand-and-arm signals — voice commands require team leaders to stop firing...

Leader Locations

Commanders and platoon leaders must be capable of controlling every element in their unit (support, assault, and security) AND communicate with higher adjacent units and external fire support assets.

Control your formation but do not get pinned down. Once pinned down, you are no longer able to help your formation. If the platoon is stopped or needs help, the platoon leader must be able to talk to the commander and his fire support assets. A platoon leader cannot do these things while low crawling behind the lead fire team.

If you lose your comms to higher and fire support, you may have lost the fight. When this happens, you are nothing more than another rifleman in control of the 5-meter radius around you. Control your formation; this includes lifting or shifting direct and indirect fires, fighting in support of the company, and advising the next higher commander of enemy strengths and weaknesses. Accurate reporting and awareness enables us to trap and then swarm the enemy from different directions with UAS and fires.

Mortars

A mortar is the only indirect fire weapon that can be counted on in the close fight. Effective use of these weapons can be the difference between winning and losing. Anywhere you can use a machine gun, you can use a 60mm mortar. Plan to use it in direct lay, direct alignment, and handheld — both direct and indirect. Our 81mm and 120mm mortars will be able to destroy many things that our 60mm can only suppress. Rehearse massing the fires of two to three mortar systems against emerging threats.

Defense

Some form of defense follows EVERY offensive operation. The defense relies on leaders to make it happen. **Never defend anything — no matter how long you plan on staying — from the objective; MOVE to the next piece of defensible terrain and establish a position there.** The enemy is going to hit the objective you

just seized with drones, fires, and a counterattack that he has probably planned and rehearsed. The enemy has a history of baiting us into positions of vulnerability and then capitalizing on us once we let our guard down.

Maintenance

In combat, maintenance requires constant attention. Focus on the systems that allow us to move, shoot, and communicate and place priority on our killing systems. Teach your Soldiers to oil their weapons as soon as they stop firing. If you wait until the weapon cools, it is too late — carbon will stick to and harden on the moving parts. Oiling must be part of consolidation and reorganization. Your first thought after you realize you are still alive should be to oil your weapon.

LTG Gregory “Greg” K. Anderson currently serves as the commanding general and senior mission commander of the XVIII Airborne Corps and Fort Bragg, NC. LTG Anderson previously served in a host of command and leader positions from platoon leader to division commander, including assignments in the 7th Infantry Division, 1st Armored Division, 75th Ranger Regiment, United States Special Operations Command, 173rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team (Airborne), United States Central Command, United States Africa Command, and 10th Mountain Division (Light). He is a native of San Jose, CA, and commissioned as an Infantry officer upon graduation from the U.S. Military Academy in 1991. He holds two master's degrees: a Master of Science from the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, CA, and a Master of Arts from the United States Army War College in Carlisle Barracks, PA. LTG Anderson has deployed 17 times including operational experience in Haiti, Panama, Bosnia, the Baltic States, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Eastern Europe. Previous command positions include 2nd Battalion, 87th Infantry Regiment, 10th Mountain Division (Light); 2nd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment; 173rd IBCT (Airborne), and the 10th Mountain Division (Light). LTG Anderson has more than seven years of joint assignments, including a deployment as the director for Joint Interagency Task Force West in Iraq.



Soldiers with the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division fire a 60mm mortar at Fort Polk on 15 August 2025. (Photo by SPC Mariah Aguilar)