BFT – PRACTICAL USE IN COMBAT, NEW CAPABILITIES, LIMITATIONS, CHALLENGES

SYSTEMY ŚLEDZENIA WOJSK WŁASNYCH - PRAKTYCZNE ZASTOSOWANIE W WALCE, NOWE MOŻLIWOŚCI, OGRANICZENIA, WYZWANIA

Rajmund T. Andrzejczak

ACOS 2Mech Corps, Cracow

Abstract: *Polish ARMY has correctly recognized and defined the dynamic changes in today's operational picture, it is developing its own systems for combat support including (polish version of) BFT. Simultaneous engagement in ISAF mission gives us unique possibility not only for system use previously implemented in US ARMY but for combat missions use as well. Systems are not only used by Polish soldiers for Polish ops but used for Polish-Americans and ANA combined ops as well. BFT gives unusual availability for informational standoff, raises situational awareness and translates into own troops safety. It allows to react way quicker and precisely decide. Sometimes the system stands in contradiction to old fashioned "classical" command styles, procedures, habits, and rules. Basing on few operations the BFT is presented with its pros and cons. The Bde and bn TOCs, patrol leaders, Bde's FCP are only few examples of BFT use. Implementation of such systems in polish Land Forces is too slow. When number of units is being decreased only implementing of BFT will improve operational capabilities in network centric environment.*

Keywords: *systems for combat support, BFT*

Streszczenie: *Wojsko Polskie rozpoznając i definiując zmiany zachodzące we współczesnym środowisku operacyjnym, rozwija własne systemy wsparcia dowodzenia, w tym również systemy śledzenia wojsk własnych. Jednoczesne zaangażowanie Polskich Sił Zadaniowych w operacji ISAF w Afganistanie daje unikalne możliwości zarówno korzystania z najnowszych, wprowadzonych już do użycia w armii USA systemów śledzenia (BFT), jak również ich wykorzystania w realnych, bojowych sytuacjach. Są one używane przez polskich żołnierzy w operacjach zarówno narodowych jak i wspólnie z amerykańskimi i afgańskimi siłami bezpieczeństwa. Dają one możliwość przewagi informacyjnej, podnoszą poziom tzw. świadomości operacyjnej sytuacji i przekładają się na bezpieczeństwo. Pozwalają na znacznie szybsze reakcje i precyzyjne decyzje. Jednocześnie stają się niekiedy w kontradykcji z dotychczasowymi „klasycznymi" procedurami, nawykami, zasadami. Na przykładzie kilku operacji przedstawiono sposoby wykorzystania systemów śledzenia ze wskazaniem zalet i ograniczeń. Zastosowanie systemu przez: brygadowe i batalionowe Centrum Operacyjne TOC, dowódców patroli, wysunięty punkt dowodzenia brygady to przykłady wykorzystania systemu. Przy sukcesywnie zmniejszanych liczbach jednostek tylko poprzez wyposażanie ich w systemy wsparcia dowodzenia i działania w środowisku sieciocentrycznym możliwe jest zwiększanie zdolności operacyjnych.*

Słowa kluczowe: *systemy wsparcia dowodzenia, systemy śledzenia wojsk własnych*

1. Introduction

New tasks and challenges in Afghanistan.

After decision regarding consolidation of Polish Military Contingent in Ghazni province and raise the number of troops as well as equipment, we had taken responsibility for the whole Ghazni province and begun our operational activity as Brigade Task Force. It effected not only in larger geographical area of responsibility but in our areas and levels of engagement too. Becoming an integral part of RC East, polish brigade had a communication holdback due to lack of command systems back up. Americans decided that they will equip bn TOCs an bde TOC as well as MRAP vehicles with BFT. After basic training regarding usage of the system, the combat use of BFT begun.

From the very beginning BFT found a big level of acceptance among troops. Brigade's TOC was equipped as a first, giving a possibility to observe and communicate with all combat platforms equipped with BFT. Parallel MRAP Cougars were equipped with BFT taken from American side. These vehicles were part of maneuver platoons, we decided so because at that time polish APCs Rosomaks were not equipped with BFT and were not "visible" in the system. Task organized maneuver platoons were giving a chance to be constant monitored and communicated during operational activities.

During that time we were able to monitor all MRAPs with BFT, as mentioned before on the beginning only those vehicles were equipped with BFT. The system tracked all allied forces, this was giving us a very good operational picture. All the RCPs moving thru our AOR on HWY 1 were visible, EODs, whose presence in the area was priceless when IED was found, such forces were visible and we were able to communicate right away. Same with helicopters, they were visible too in BFT, transportation flights, CAS and Medevacs. Commander tracking all these forces and understanding the situation could react right away when necessary in his AOR. Soon US side issued more systems to other TOCs, this fact increased effectiveness of troops command and control.

2. System combat use.

BFT found its application in control phase (commanding troops) of all combat and logistic operations. Couple examples will let judge its usefulness. In everyday routine operations we were able to monitor all helicopters. In case of american helicopter entered TFWE AOR, we often communicated for track correction over polish patrols. If this was not interfering their task they were observing troops from above. This was a simple way to improve safety with least effort. Other times, when temporary comms black outs occurred we used helicopters to move in bound with our troops IOT check situation and retranslate. BFT system proved to be invaluable support in directing dispersed troops in AOR.

In one of many operations nickneme "Eagle's feather" more than 50 vehicles were used and around 500 PAX in direct actions. Such concentration of forces

demanded substantial coordination, additional challenge was that ASF and american forces participated too. Operation was coordinated from Bde's TOC, meanwhile Bde's Cdr established his TAC in the field, manned with couple staff officers (small operational group) based on vehicle with BFT terminal. According to the CONOPS american element was to do blocking psn, after initial coordination its movement and task was monitored by Bde's Cdr. Thanks to BFT chat mode, we were able to communicate without any additional outside encroachment and radio traffic. What is remarkable, that the whole correspondence was via chat not the radio as previously, and that gave us better quality of information, insight to other elements's situation in the operation, at the same time we were not blocking radio channels.

During RCP activity, engineers were marking BFT map with icons so the other subunits could see this information in real time. Best example is marking data considering mines, IED, or other which is useful for every leader at once. If RCP leader put an icon with IED on track, parallel other maneuver element leader could take it into consideration (modify) for his activity conduct.

In case of Medevac request, BFT system, gave precise grids to location of subunit requesting. This allowed pilots to conduct their mission, communicate between helicopter and Bde's TOC. Commander was able to observe the move, see exactly where the wounded is, have additional data such as speed and even landing moment. No additional radio correspondence was required, this would only take time and complicate mission. Such effective Medeveac use would be impossible without BFT. What is crucial, is that all Medevac helicopters in RCE where monitored from Bagram Medical TOC, this increased the level effectiveness of activities and quick coordination between helicopters and hospitals.

During BFT based operations, additional possibility was that situation could be assessed in real time, this allowed to direct for instance ISR assets or CAS to requiring elements. When troops where in contact with enemy, they where requesting for support having the same live operational awareness. Commander could rapidly direct ISR or CAS precisely where needed. Even those helicopters which were not equipped with BFT could more effectively steer to requesting zone with GPS grids given by troops on the ground.

During operations in vicinity of bases, vehicles equipped with BFT where monitored with system of cameras from balloons and observation towers. In Afghanistan in some situations enemy was invisible for vehicles crews. The picture from balloon and tower's cameras (different angle and height) allowed observation and target acquisition, used for instance to correct mortar fire.

3. Conclusions

1) Modern operations characterize with such a dynamics that without fueling them in real time with exact data, combat assets can't be used in proper manner. Long distances (small number of troops) and shortage of forces, requires effective decisive use in right place and time. Only BFT allows that.

2) Satellite signal made troops use more often BFT than radio because of the signal strength, chat, precision, accessibility to other elements, comfort and increased situational awareness , decreasing radio traffic at the same time.

3) Although the situational awareness increases, procedures become easier, systems for command and control support bring more challenges to the users, especially when it comes to their content preparation. The use of number of assets in short period of time, is now technically possible. But it requires tactical knowledge about assets, their possibilities, advantages and disadvantages.

4) BFT of similar system to give its best has to plugged into or with other systems (fire, C2, Signal) their ability to communicate with other systems are crucial.

5) Additional value of BFT is psychological influence on troops on the ground – which gives a soldier operating in hostile environment, in hard conditions consciousness that in case of need he will get immediate support.

4. Recommendations

1) The implementation of command and control system in Land Forces must be done on faster pace than previous attempts. For example delays with Szafran system made it old and not catching with today's dynamics. In case when the basic validation criterium for forces is capalities not the number of forces, systems for command support such as BFT become a priority.

2) Parallel to technical researches, operational validation must proceed, often it is the signal officer doing the job, without operational officer contribution. This creates a holdback and works delays. Operational officers must partake in all phases of the project, the implementation, validation, usefulness and more over defining additional needs.

3) Additionally and parallel to researches for new command system, we have to check in time it affects the command and control in operations. Time and time again it turned out to be that, tactical rules, procedures or architecture of command did not stick to new conditions. These processes must follow in parallel manner.

Brig Rajmund T. Andrzejczak *– ACOS 2Mech Corps, Cracow. Earlier Cdr UNDOF, Chief G3 MNDCS Iraq, Cdr Polish Task Force 2008/2009. Ph. D. student AON, Command and Management faculty.*
gen. bryg. Rajmund T. Andrzejczak *pełnił funkcję szefa sztabu, a następnie zastępcy dowódcy Polsko-Litewskiego Batalionu Sił Pokojowych. Był dowódcą Polskiego Kontyngentu Wojskowego w misji UNDOF na Wzgórzach Golan. Następnie służył w Zarządzie Operacyjnym – G3 Dowództwa Wojsk Lądowych. W okresie 2006-2007 pełnił służbę w Oddziale G3 MNDCS podczas VII zmiany PKW Irak. W 2008 r. został wyznaczony na stanowisko zastępcy dowódcy 34. Brygady Kawalerii Pancernej. Dowodził IV i V zmianą Polskiego Kontyngentu Wojskowego w Afganistanie. Obecnie jest asystentem zastępcy dowódcy ─ szefa sztabu 2. Korpusu Zmechanizowanego.*