

Fort Campbell Historic Wet Gap Crossing

By CPT Jordan Malkoff



Soldiers from 502nd MRBC (Viking), ground guides vehicles onto the bridge. Photo by MAJ Kevin Andersen, U.S. Army.

The 39th Brigade Engineer Battalion (BEB), 2nd Brigade Combat Team (2BCT) executed the first full scale wet gap crossing in the Fort Campbell training area in 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) history in the beginning of May 2019. The wet gap was the most significant training objective within the 2BCT cumulative field training exercise (FTX), adding an unfamiliar flavor to 2BCT's focus on Joint Forcible Entry (JFE) as it created a new set of challenges for the Infantry Brigade Combat Team (IBCT). The 2BCT Commander, COL Joseph Escandon (Strike 6) expressed interest in performing an actual wet gap crossing after participating in a division Warfighter exercise where the arduous crossing of combat power was painstakingly achieved through simulation and hundreds of hours of staff work. The Warfighter exposed Strike 6 to a unique challenge that 2BCT may face in future combat operations; thus, planting the seed for a wet gap crossing training objective later in his command.

The conduct of a wet gap crossing, typically a division level mission, injected a unique problem set and series of challenges for the brigade's planners, maneuver forces, logistics trains, and especially its engineers. Additionally, an IBCT Brigade Engineer Battalion does not have organic wet gap crossing assets, it requires support from a multi-role bridge company (MRBC) in order to cross a wet gap. In this case the 39th BEB sought support from the 502nd MRBC (Call sign VIKING), an active duty unit out of Fort Knox, KY as well as the 739th MRBC (Call sign POSEIDON), a U.S. Army Reserve unit from Wisconsin. Given an extremely formidable problem set, and uncharted ground for an IBCT to travel, this team of mixed Army compositions (COMPO 1 and COMPO 3) proved exceptional at fighting through friction, solving problems and crossing new boundaries of what an IBCT is capable of achieving.

The wet gap crossing, though the main training objective of the FTX, warrants discussing the context of the execution to understand its vast complexity. The overall concept of the exercise was to conduct brigade air assault in order to seize enemy held terrain and repair an airfield, followed by an expansion of the lodgment. The maneuver forces then were to close and destroy the enemy which required the IBCT to conduct a wet gap crossing across a 230 meter gap, to seize an objective on the far side and then defend it against an enemy counter attack. With thousands of troops, vehicles, aircraft, and boats all moving synchronously across the 30 mile stretch of training areas on Fort Campbell, one of the greatest threats to mission success was communication. How do you bring harmony to the chaotic symphony that is an IBCT operation to cross a river, in an orderly fashion, at one time? The 39th BEB performed remarkably by executing extensive preparation, planning, and establishing a robust communication (mission command) network.

The 39th BEB established a baseline of knowledge through leader education and rehearsals internally to the BEB and across the leaders in 2BCT prior to conducting the FTX.

This challenging operation had not been attempted on Fort Campbell in recent memory. U.S. Army doctrine recommends conducting a full-scale rehearsal of a wet gap crossing on like terrain of the intended crossing site before attempting the mission. In order to accomplish this, the 39th BEB hosted several educational classroom events leading up to the FTX, in order to assist the planning and preparation across 2BCT.

The 39th BEB also executed a battalion planning exercise to execute the Military Decision Making Process prior to the arrival of the reserve component forces. This allowed the 39th BEB to develop a plan that overlaid with the Fort Campbell terrain. In this case the 39th BEB planned that 739th MRBC (POSEIDON) would construct 2 float rafts to begin ferrying mounted combat power across the gap while simultaneously 502nd MRBC (VIKING) would focus on the bridge across the gap. Both of these operations occurring while aviation assets, CH-47s, would deliver additional bridge spans to the gap to increase the rate of construction. Given the plan, the 39th BEB executed a scaled rehearsal prior to the field training exercise as this was the first time that the reserve and active duty forces (engineers and military police) had worked simultaneously on a bridging operation on Fort Campbell, KY together; all within 24 hours of arriving for training! This full scale rehearsal allowed the active and reserve components to work through communication issues, gain an understanding of the terrain, timing of employing the forces and how to synchronize the operation with maneuver elements. This synchronization, timing and extensive plan was conveyed to the entire BCT during the Combined Arms Rehearsal in order to allow the reconnaissance, maneuver, fires, mission command and logistics forces to understand the sequence of maneuver support to enable the crossing of the wet gap.

On the eve of execution, the majority of 2BCT conducted an air assault to seize key terrain to serve as a brigade assembly area for the gap crossing. Simultaneously, Cavalry troops conducted reconnaissance up to and of the near side of the crossing area to determine crossing sites and the best approaches to the gap. Light Infantry companies were close behind and seized crossing sites on the near side of the gap while the Cavalry troops continued across the gap on inflatable zodiac rafts, all under the cover of darkness. Meanwhile, the engineers occupied equipment parks and emplaced a system for traffic control in preparation for over a thousand vehicles that could support the movement of an entire BCT across the gap. Just before the sun rose, the following day, boats and rafts rushed into the water to begin assembling rafts and a bridge across the 230 meter gap in a race against enemy counter action. The first mounted forces were across the gap on rafts in less than 45 minutes and the bridge was fully constructed in less than 2.5 hours; an incredible feat of competence and synchronization for multiple organizations who had never worked together before these moments.



Soldiers from 739th MRBC (POSEIDON) U.S. Army Reserves, ferries armed HMMWV across the with rafting operations Photo by MAJ Kevin Andersen, U.S. Army.



Soldiers of the 502nd MRBC ground guide vehicles across the full enclosure. Photo by CPT Mike Darden, U.S. Army.



CH-47 conducts air-delivery of bridge spans to the gap while Soldiers from 502nd MRBC (Viking), retrieve the span to attach it to the bridge. Photo by MAJ Kevin Andersen, U.S. Army.



Soldiers from 502nd MRBC (Viking) connect bridge spans of the full enclosure bridge across the 230m. Photo by MAJ Kevin Andersen, U.S. Army.

A wet gap crossing requires diverse types of forces with different mission sets to be accomplished in accordance with military doctrine, especially when encountering complications. In 2BCT's FTX, COMSEC compromise and chemical warfare were these adversaries. For the exercise itself the 39th BEB planned an extensive communications network for the crossing by establishing nodes for traffic control elements, nodes for the engineer forces constructing the ribbon bridge across the gap, and nodes for the assault maneuver forces crossing the gap. The 39th BEB also synchronized the operation with an execution matrix and brevity codes to control and allow all nodes to obtain situational awareness across the entire crossing area. The extensive network and use of brevity codes enabled 2BCT to successfully communicate across the brigade even when at one point 2BCT communications were compromised by enemy activity, a COMSEC compromise. Because a redundant network and system of brevity codes were in place, the enemy was unable to discern 2BCT's activities even when they could observe and listen in on friendly forces communications.

The other complication 2BCT overcame was the enemy's use of chemical munitions. The most vulnerable

point for a chemical attack for the engineer battalion was during the wet gap crossing, and that is precisely when the chemical rounds impacted. Due to prior planning and positioning of resources the engineer battalion was able to quickly react to don chemical safety equipment, recon the location of future munitions, decontaminate equipment, and most importantly, complete the mission. In the face of extreme setbacks 39th BEB and 2BCT were able to continue to take the fight to the enemy and move 2BCT to the far side of the gap to seize the far side objective and conduct a defense against the impending enemy counterattack, the final phase of 2BCT's FTX.

The success of the wet gap crossing operation and field training exercise is a direct result of the adaptability, discipline, and teamwork of the Soldiers of the 39th BEB, 2BCT and Reserve Forces in the U.S. Army. Although these multi-component units had never worked together on arguably one of the most complex operations in our doctrine, the 2nd Brigade Combat Team was successful on this day, becoming the first time in recent history a wet gap crossing was conducted on Fort Campbell, KY.

CPT Jordan Malkoff is currently the company commander of the Headquarters and Headquarters Company of the 39th Brigade Engineer Battalion at Fort Campbell, KY.



*A Soldier of the 502nd MRBC uses the full enclosure as an opportunity to re-enlist.
Photo by CPT Mike Darden, U.S. Army.*