Chapter 1
Concepts

GENERAL

The purpose of any river crossing is to project combat power across a water obstacle in order to accomplish a mission. A river crossing is a special operation. It requires specific procedures for success, because the water obstacle prevents normal ground maneuver. It also requires unique technical support and more detailed planning and control measures than normal tactical operations. The nature and size of the obstacle, the threat situation, and the available crossing assets limit the commander's options.

The challenge is to minimize the river's impact on the commander's tactics. The force is vulnerable while crossing, as it must break its movement formations, concentrate at crossing points, re-form on the far shore, and reduce its movement rate to the speed of the crossing means. The commander cannot effectively fight his force while it is split by a river. He must reduce this vulnerability by decreasing his force's exposure time. The best method is to cross the river in stride as a continuation of the tactical operation, whether in the offense or retrograde. Only as a last resort should the force pause to build up combat power or crossing means before crossing. This chapter introduces river crossing operations by discussing the characteristics of this special and difficult task.

AIRLAND BATTLE CONTEXT

AirLand Battle doctrine requires offensive action, high levels of mobility, and audacity. All of these are difficult to achieve when the force is hampered by a river. River crossing operations, within the context of AirLand Battle doctrine, as they will in future AirLand Operations, restore the mobility needed for battlefield success.

Successful river crossings require the application of the four tenets of AirLand Battle doctrine. Carefully selecting the point of attack and seizing the initiative enables a force to make a successful crossing while denying the threat time to recover from the initial surprise. A force cannot conduct a successful crossing without first seizing the initiative. A force must be well prepared to have the necessary agility to react faster to changes than the threat, as the crossing proceeds amid confusion, loss of crossing means, casualties, and errors. A force with necessary agility can conduct a hasty crossing upon arriving at a river without significant loss of momentum, cross in-stride, and develop an attack into an exploitation. Crossing requires depth in area on both shores of the river, in crossing resources, and in time to mass forces on the far shore. This depth must be developed by attacking to seize necessary terrain, by isolating the crossing area with air attack and fires, and by efficiently using all available crossing means if the crossing is to succeed. Forces must carefully synchronize all actions to ensure that the crossing produces adequate combat power at all critical places and maximum combat power at the decisive point and time. This synchronization requires careful calculation during planning and attention during execution.

River crossings take place within the context of close, deep, and rear operations. The focus of the close fight in the offense is the attack across the river and the subsequent securing of the bridgehead. In the retrograde, it is the movement across and subsequent defense along the river. Deep operations conducted by divisions and corps isolate crossing areas from threat reinforcement. Rear operations in an offensive crossing maintain the momentum, by ensuring the unimpeded movement of forces behind the initial assault, and sustain the force in the bridgehead. Initial preparations for a retrograde crossing are primarily rear operations.

CROSSING CATEGORIES

Corps assigns missions and provides the necessary support and equipment. Rarely will a river crossing be a specified task within that mission. More often, a division river crossing will bean implied task. Divisions normally assign bridgehead objectives and control movement across the river. Brigades assault across the river and secure the bridgehead as an element of a larger force.

Both division and corps headquarters anticipate and plan for river crossings in advance. All river crossings require detailed planning at these echelons. The planning requirements and technical support are similar, whether the crossing is hasty, deliberate, or retrograde.

Hasty

A hasty river crossing is a continuation of the attack across the river with no intentional pause at the water to prepare, so there is no loss of momentum. This is possible when threat resistance is weak and the river is

not a severe obstacle; therefore, a brigade does not need to make extensive plans but can rapidly and audaciously force a crossing.

A hasty river crossing is preferable to a deliberate crossing. It features decentralized control at the brigade level. The brigade may use organic, existing, or any available crossing means, but additional support from division or corps is often necessary.

A well-practiced standing operating procedure (SOP) compresses planning and preparation time. A concise order, clearly articulating the commander's intent, allows exploitation wherever subordinate units successfully force a crossing. When possible, advance elements seize crossing sites intact and ahead of the main body.

Against negligible or light threat resistance on both banks, the force does not have to clear all threat forces from the river to conduct a hasty crossing. It capitalizes on the threat's confusion and inability to effectively oppose the crossing.

The force crosses the river at multiple points across a broad front. It makes the crossing as soon as its elements reach the river. As the bulk of the force crosses the river, minimum forces remain to secure the crossing sites.

Deliberate

Corps and divisions conduct a deliberate river crossing when a hasty crossing is not feasible, when one has failed, or when they are renewing offensive operations along a river. A deliberate river crossing is an attack across the river after a halt to make the detailed preparations necessary to ensure success. It features centralized division planning and control, thorough preparations, and the massing of forces and crossing equipment. Time is available for extensive reconnaissance, full-scale rehearsals, development of alternate traffic routes, and logistics stockpiling.

River crossing fundamentals are the same for hasty and deliberate crossings, but their use varies. For example, traffic control is a key fundamental. The commander maintains it in a hasty crossing by using the unit SOP and a fragmentary order. In a deliberate crossing, he uses a traffic control organization that implements a detailed movement plan.

Retrograde

A retrograde crossing is a movement to the rear across a water obstacle while in contact with the threat. It establishes the defense on the exit bank or continues the retrograde to defensive positions beyond the water obstacle. A retrograde river crossing also features centralized planning and control because of limitations on existing bridges. It has the same amount of detailed planning as for a deliberate offensive crossing. Significantly, failure of the retrograde on the entry bank can cause the loss of the entire force.

CROSSING FUNDAMENTALS

Certain fundamentals are characteristic of all river crossings. They describe important attributes of crossing operations that must be included in crossing plans. Failure to consider these fundamentals can seriously risk the success of the crossing.

Surprise

The range and lethality of modern weapons allow even a small force to defeat a larger one exposed in an unfavorable position. A river provides this possibility by channeling a force through a small number of crossing sites, splitting its combat power on separate banks, and exposing units on the water. Surprise minimizes these disadvantages; forces that fail to achieve surprise may also fail in the crossing attempt.

A deception plan is a key element of surprise. It reinforces the threat's predisposition to believe that the force will take a particular course of action. The threat usually expects a crossing. A deception plan that employs reconnaissance, site preparations, force buildup, and preparatory fires at a time or location other than the intended crossing area may delay an effective threat response to the true crossing.

The usual operations security (OPSEC) measures are also important. Commanders enforce camouflage, noise, thermal, electromagnetic, and light discipline. Force deployment avoids predictable patterns. In particular, commanders closely control movement and concealment of river crossing equipment and other obvious river crossing preparations. Despite modern intelligence-gathering technology, the skillful use of night, smoke, fog, and bad weather is still effective.

Extensive Preparation

Comprehensive intelligence of threat defenses and crossing-area terrain must be developed early, since planning depends on an accurate and complete intelligence picture.

Supporting units, which include engineer battalions, bridge companies, smoke-generation platoons, and military police (MP) companies, link up early. They immediately begin crossing preparations and are available to train the lead units during rehearsals.

Commanders plan and initiate deceptive operations early to mask the actual preparation. These operations should conceal both the time and location of the crossing, so they begin before and continue throughout the preparation period.

Work necessary to improve routes to handle the crossing operation's traffic volume should occur early enough not to interfere with other uses of the routes. This requires a detailed plan carefully synchronized with the deception plan.

Rehearsals are essential to clarify roles and procedures, train personnel, inspect equipment, develop teamwork, and ensure unity of effort.

Flexible Plan

Even successful crossings seldom go according to plan. A flexible plan enables the river crossing operation to adapt rapidly to changes in the situation during execution. It allows the force to salvage the loss of a crossing site or to exploit a sudden opportunity. A flexible plan for a river crossing is the result of deliberate design, not chance. Such a plan features –

- Multiple approach routes from assembly areas to crossing sites.
- Lateral routes to switch units between crossing sites.
- Secondary crossing sites and staging areas to activate if threat action closes the primaries.
- Stocks of crossing equipment held in reserve to replace losses or open alternate sites.
- Preplanned engagement areas to block enemy counterattacks.

Traffic Control

The river is a significant obstacle that slows and stops units, thus impeding their ability to maneuver. They may be restricted to moving in column formations along a few routes that funnel together at the crossing sites. Control is essential for units to cross at the locations and in the sequence desired. Control achieves maximum crossing efficiency and prevents the formation of targets susceptible to destruction by artillery or air strikes. In addition, effective traffic control contributes to the flexibility of the plan by enabling commanders to change the sequence, timing, or site of crossing units. The traffic-control organization can switch units over different routes or hold them in assembly areas as directed by the tactical commander.

Organization

Commanders use the same command posts (CPs) for river crossings as they do for other operations. These CPs, however, take on additional functions in river crossings. For this reason, commanders specify which CPs and staff positions have specific river crossing planning and control duties. This may require a temporary collocation of headquarters cells (or individual augmentation) and an increase in communications means.

The commander organizes support forces consisting of engineer, MP, chemical, and other elements. This organization reports to his controlling headquarters. Since this is a temporary grouping, procedures established by the control headquarters must be clear, simple, and rehearsed by all elements to ensure responsive support of the plan and unity of command.

Terrain management is an integral part of the crossing operation. The controlling headquarters assigns different areas for support forces to work in and for forces to concentrate in before crossing. Otherwise, they interfere with each other and become lucrative targets for conventional, chemical, and nuclear fires.

Speed

A river crossing is a race between the crossing units and the threat to mass combat power on the far shore. The longer the force takes to cross, the less likely it will succeed, as the threat will defeat in detail the elements split by the river. Speed is of the utmost importance to crossing success. The commander must allow no interference with the flow of vehicles and units once the crossing has started.