

## Chapter 5

# Retrograde Operations

### GENERAL

The goal of a retrograde river crossing operation is to cross a water obstacle while preserving the integrity of the force. A retrograde operation is an organized movement to the rear or away from the threat.

Deception is always planned and executed to deceive the threat and to protect the force during the retrograde operation. As a minimum, these plans seek to conceal the extent of the operation and the actual crossing sites. Smoke, electronic deception, and dummy sites reduce the threat's capability to disrupt the crossing.

This chapter describes only those tactics and techniques used by a division in a retrograde river crossing operation that are different from those used in an offensive crossing. A retrograde crossing features centralized control at division level and detailed

planning within the time available. It differs from an offensive crossing in several aspects:

- Initially, both banks of the water obstacle are under friendly control. Accordingly, detailed information concerning the obstacle and the area over which the retrograde are conducted is readily available to the commander.
- All existing bridges and other crossing sites are available to the retrograde force to expedite the crossing.
- In most cases, relative combat power favors the threat.

The same control measures are used in retrograde operations as in offensive operations. *Figure 5-1* shows an example. See Chapter 4 for a discussion of each control measure and a command and control diagram.

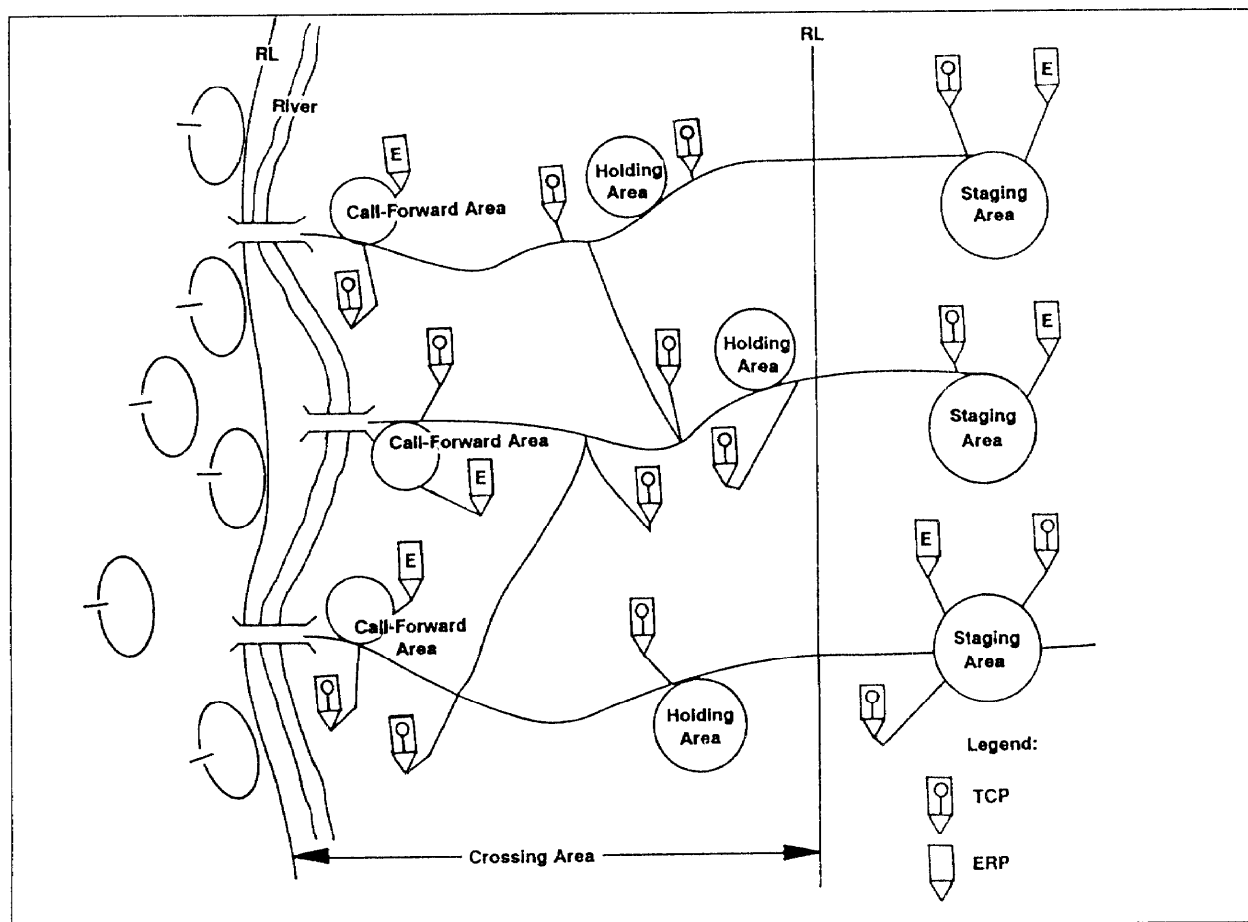


Figure 5-1. Control measures

### RETROGRADE TYPES

A retrograde operation may be forced by threat action or by a higher headquarters. A well-planned, well-organized, and aggressively executed retrograde operation provides opportunities for the division to inflict heavy damage on threat troops and equipment while continuing to maintain its fighting integrity. The three types of retrograde operations are delay, withdrawal, and retirement.

#### Delay

A delay is an operation in which the unit, under threat pressure, trades space for time by inflicting maximum damage on the threat without being decisively engaged in combat. A delay combined with a retrograde river crossing has the following phases:

- Delay
- Crossing
- Defense

Each phase is separate only in planning; they overlap during execution. The employment of military crossing equipment in the retrograde is the reverse of the

method used in a deliberate, offensive river crossing operation. *Figure 5-2* relates the retrograde sequence to the crossing stages.

#### Delay Phase

The delay phase provides security for the main body and has the mission to gain enough time for the unit to accomplish its mission (cross the river). For this reason, delaying units take some risk. The delaying force must deceive the threat and keep it from the river, allowing the main body to cross and establish the exit-bank defense.

Units not assigned tasks in the delay, including those units with a mission to support crossing areas or establish the defense on the exit bank, execute a planned retirement or withdrawal and cross the river as rapidly as possible. To preclude early threat detection of the retrograde, they follow a movement control plan that supports the deception plan.

The delay phase continues until the battle is within communications and fire-support range of the exit-bank defense. The delaying force must be strong

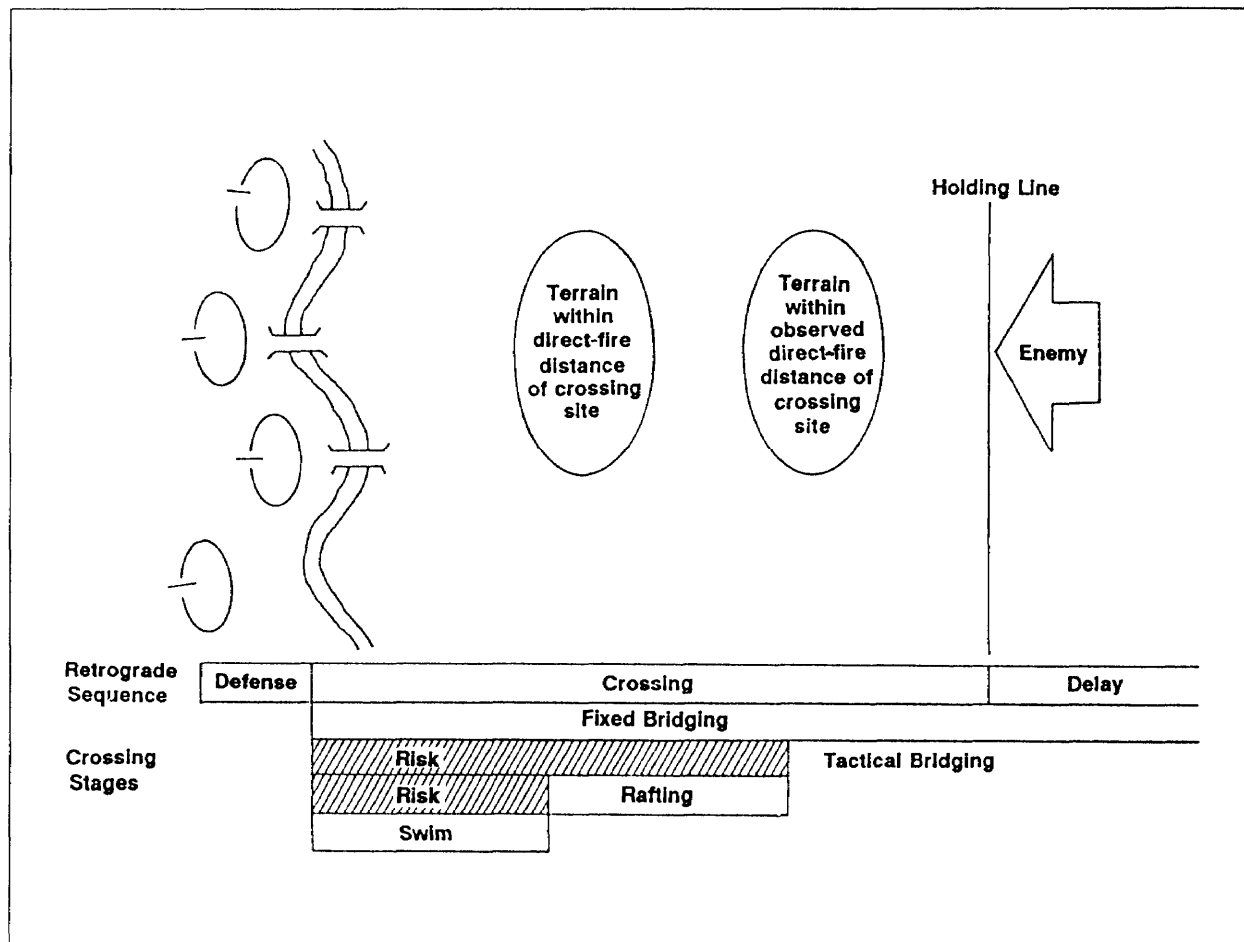


Figure 5-2. Retrograde planning

## 5-2 Retrograde Operations

enough to hold the threat until other units establish the defense. The defending force assumes responsibility for the battle forward of a delay line called a holding line, while delaying units still on the entry bank complete a rearward passage of lines through the defending force.

The division commander establishes the holding line on defensible terrain between the river and the threat. Its location precludes direct and observed indirect fires in the crossing area.

Figure 5-3 shows an example of a retrograde crossing. In this case, the 3rd brigade is the delaying force. It occupies battle positions to the rear of the 1st and 2nd brigades at Phase Line (PL) Plum, the initial delay position (IDP), to help them withdraw. The 3rd brigade delays the threat forward of the holding line until the rest of the division crosses the river and the 1st and 2nd brigades reestablish the defense along the river.

#### Crossing Phase

In contrast to normal offensive crossing operations, friendly forces initially control retrograde crossing sites, which may be insufficient in number. The threat usually knows where the logical crossing sites are and attacks them early in the operation, but it must not be allowed to capture them. Friendly forces should develop additional sites to provide flexibility against this possibility.

The commander should attempt to salvage tactical bridges and rafts for future use, but it may be necessary to use them for the crossing and then destroy them to prevent capture. Fixed bridging must be prepared for destruction and also be protected against ground and air attack. This requires close coordination with the delaying force to preclude cutting off friendly forces or allowing threat seizure of sites intact.

The brigade main CP, commanded by the brigade XO (CAC) is responsible for the passage of all units through the crossing area. The CAC is designated early enough in the operation to begin the required extensive planning. The CAC is designated by the tactical commander to control the movement of the retrograde forces through the crossing area.

Traffic control up to and through the crossing area is a critical problem in crossing operations. For this reason, plans for movement must be detailed, and control of movement is essential. This control is exercised by the CAC with assistance of the delaying force commander (brigade commander). The CAC controls all movement within the crossing area.

It is the responsibility of the CAC to ensure the continuous and orderly flow of the retrograde elements across the water obstacle. His control includes both the ERPs, which ensures that all vehicles are of proper class and size, and also all waiting areas that feed

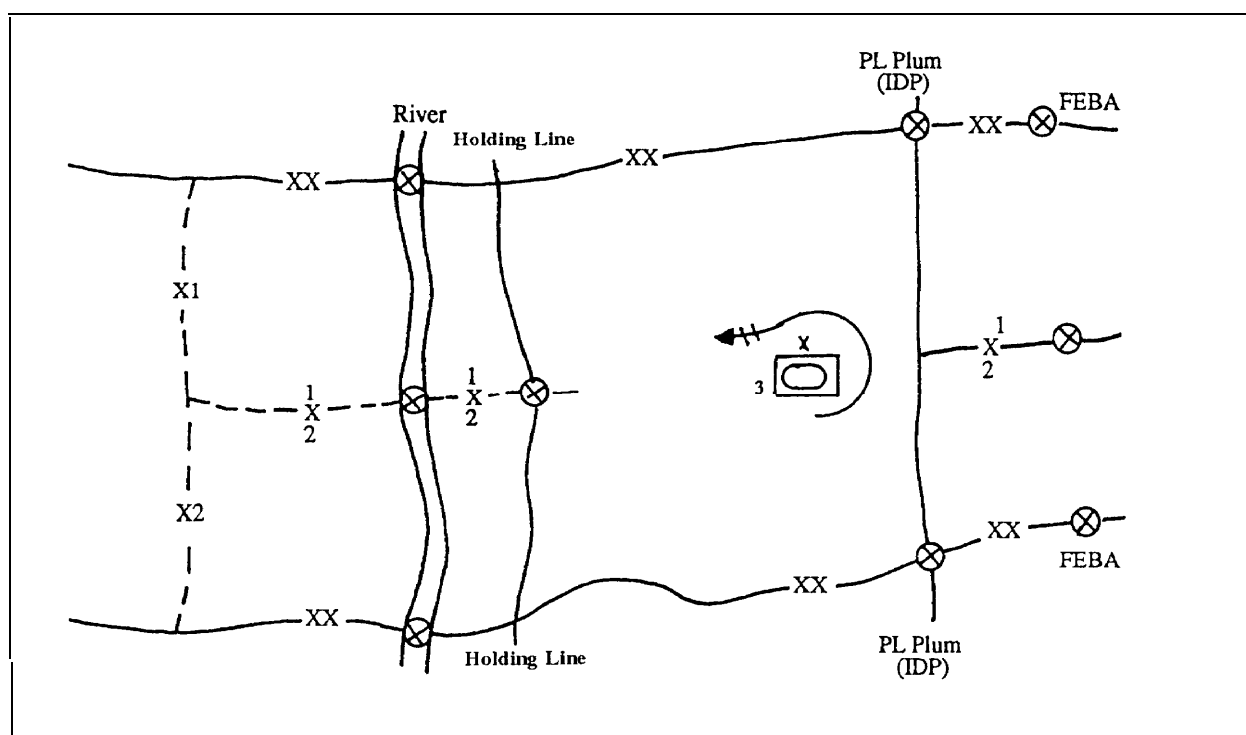


Figure 5-3. Retrograde crossing

vehicles through the crossing area. To assist the CAC, MPs establish and operate TCPs to manage the traffic flow. Crossing site commanders operate the crossing means. The CAC and his staff must synchronize the crossing plan with the commander's tactical plan.

Activity within the crossing area will begin with two-way crossings by combat service support units evacuating nonessential supplies or restocking the delay force. During the early stages of the retrograde, the existing crossing means may be supplemented by tactical bridging. As a minimum, additional tactical bridge assets must be planned and available.

Initially, freed and floating bridges are used to cross the force. The force crosses on bridges as long as possible, since this is the most rapid means. Once the bridges become vulnerable to capture, air attack, or observed indirect fires, they may be converted to rafts or removed. Crossing continues using rafting or swimming vehicles. When the rafts become vulnerable to direct fire, the rafts are removed. The remainder of the delaying force crosses by swimming vehicles or 15-man assault boats. Finally, the crossings are made under the suppressive fires of the defending force's direct- and indirect-fire weapons.

The crossing attempts an orderly flow across the water obstacle while conserving combat power. The retrograde crossing begins as a rear-area operation for the division. Initially, it is a traffic-scheduling problem, centrally controlled by the division. The division establishes crossing areas before crossing maneuver brigades. Crossing area operations are the same as for offensive crossings (see Chapter 3). Even when the division has to establish the crossing areas quickly, under adverse circumstances, it synchronizes crossing support activities (to maintain high movement rates) with those of the defense force (preparing to close the routes) in the crossing areas.

Crossing sites need the highest priority for air defense. This is particularly critical when the threat has air superiority or when air parity exists. The sequence for crossing air-defense units should account for the need to provide continuous coverage of crossing sites.

The division engineers are fully committed to the delay. As a result, engineers under control of the CAE run the crossing sites and support initial preparation of exit-bank defenses.

#### *Defense Phase*

The defense phase stops the threat by keeping it out of the crossing area, denying crossing sites upstream or downstream, and destroying forces attempting to cross the river. In particular, it targets potential threat crossing assets. Whether continuing the retrograde further

or defending along the river, the division establishes a strong exit-bank defense. The defending force protects the delaying force as it crosses the river after battle handover. The rearward passage of lines by the delaying force is a normal defensive operation, complicated by the river.

Initially the defending force is small. It consists of combat and combat support units not involved in the delay as well as augmentation from corps reserves. Because enough forces are not available to defend all points along the river, the defense depends on rapid lateral movement to concentrate at vulnerable points. In particular, it orients on and protects the crossing sites against threat forward detachments and heliborne forces.

After battle handover from the delaying force, the defending force is responsible for the area between the holding line and defensive positions on the exit bank. Massed fires by the defending force help its elements in contact forward of the river to withdraw, thereby complicating the retrograde crossing.

*Figure 5-4* illustrates the staggered nature of the battle handover at the holding line and the subsequent defense at the river. The threat, following its doctrine of direct and parallel pursuit, attempts to reach the river on alternate routes and cut off the delaying force with part of its strength, while other threat elements attempt to cross on the heels of the delaying unit. The defending force accepts battle handover from the last of the delaying force at the holding line and covers its crossing over a freed bridge that is prepared for demolition. Friendly forces at the river prevent the threat from crossing at the site of a demolished freed bridge so that companies securing the crossing site can safely withdraw in turn.

#### **Withdrawal**

The withdrawal differs from the delay in that it is an operation in which the unit in contact disengages from a threat force and moves to the rear. Withdrawals are executed when the commander desires to withdraw to control future tactical operations without being forced to do so by threat pressure. A withdrawal follows the same sequence as the delay. The only difference is that the unit may or may not be in threat contact.

#### **Retirement**

Retirements are rearward movements away from the threat by a force not in contact. They are normally covered by the security forces of another unit to their rear and are conducted as tactical road marches. A retirement follows the same sequence as the delay.

## **5-4 Retrograde Operations**

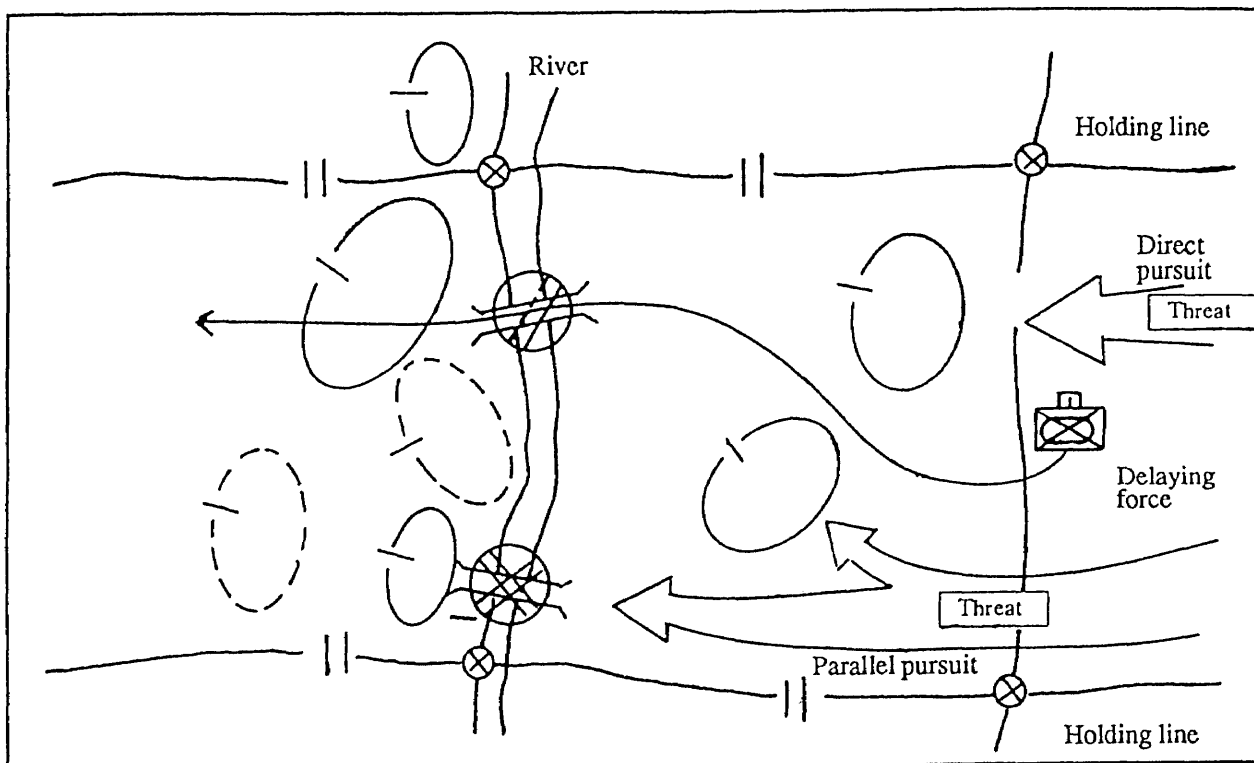


Figure 5-4. Battle handover and defense

### DENIAL MEASURES

Denial measures are actions taken to hinder or deny threat use of resources or facilities. In retrograde crossings, the commander includes bridges and crossing sites in his denial measures.

A defending force commander is responsible for preparing the destruction of existing bridging and other crossing means in his sector, such as ferries, to prevent their use by the threat. The CAE controls the engineers who prepare those targets. The timing of their destruction depends on their use in supporting the crossing. When the tactical situation dictates that crossing sites are no longer needed or the risk of capture outweighs their usefulness, the defending force must destroy them. Use of bridges in the retrograde requires a redundant means of bridge destruction and a robust demolition guard with an engineer demolition party. Because of the severe consequences of a premature decision to destroy a site, the division commander usually designates sites as reserve targets and issues specific orders stating under what conditions and by whose authority this destruction can be done. He usually delegates this authority to a defending commander after battle handover from the delaying force, when the only units remaining to cross belong to the defending force. The defending commander may save a selected number of existing bridges for passage of his last elements on the far bank and then destroy them in the face

of the threat. This strategy requires close coordination to preclude cutting off friendly units.

Engineers destroy military bridging that they cannot recover quickly. Bridge stocks are in short supply; therefore, if existing bridges are sufficient to support the retrograde, the engineers recover military bridging early. In addition, the denial of major existing bridges can be so important that the commander may choose to destroy them early and rely on military bridging to cross the remainder of his force. Ribbon bridging is preferred for this crossing because of its recovery speed. Engineers either recover lines of communication (LOC) bridges well before the threat arrives or destroy those left in place after the delay.

### PLANNING

The division commander identifies the holding line and the units required to fight the delay and defense battles. The division engineer, in conjunction with the G3, identifies crossing sites and required crossing assets. The division staff coordinates for the additional corps assets. The staff uses the planning process identified in Chapter 6.

The commander uses deception to conceal the extent of the operation and the actual crossing sites. Smoke, electronic warfare, and dummy sites reduce the threat's capability to disrupt the crossing. OPSEC keeps the

threat intelligence collectors from identifying the time and place of such crossing.

The commander may consider retaining fixed bridges in defense of the river line if he anticipates future counterattacks back across the river. He may also partially destroy bridges to ease restoration in

future offensive operations, weighing this decision against threat use of the bridges.

A retrograde river crossing combines two of the most difficult forms of combat – a retrograde and a river crossing. It requires detailed planning and skillful execution to preserve the force and defeat the threat.