



Grafenwöhr, GERMANY—Members of the Kosovo Security Force fire mortar rounds during live fire training as part of command post exercise Dynamic Front at Grafenwöhr Training Area, Germany, Feb. 7, 2026. Dynamic Front is a training mission of synchronized command and fires planning, maneuvering through a complex landscape of assembly area operations, artillery acumen, and live firing drills. The objective is to ensure that NATO forces are equipped with the capability to execute lethal fire support in wide-area ground combat across Europe. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Dylan Bailey)

NCO's Roles

in Integration of Fires

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One of the first, and best, lessons I learned as a brand-new Sergeant was that Noncommissioned Officers (NCOs) are supposed to put themselves at the point of friction and be the ones who make things happen on the ground. This point is proven in the dust and chaos of the National Training Center (NTC), where every decision is tested under pressure. Rotational Training Units (RTU) face a thinking enemy who doesn't follow a script. This thinking enemy known as Opposing Force (or OPFOR) demands the integration of fires—which means coordinating artillery, mortars, close air support, and other assets at the Brigade (BDE) level and below—to create multiple dilemmas for the enemy while the enemy is doing the same to the RTU. This problem is an NCO's fight as much as a staff officer's and commander's. This paper lays out why you, as an

NCO, need to care about fires integration, drawing from real lessons learned at NTC over the course of multiple rotations and speaking directly to your role in making the mission succeed. By the end, you'll see how your ability to lead and place yourself at the point of friction to integrate fires directly shapes the battlefield and saves lives.

Fires, in Army terms, are the use of weapon systems to deliver lethal or non-lethal effects on a target; think artillery barrages, mortar missions, missiles from fixed or rotary wing aircraft, drones, or even electronic jamming. At the BDE and below level, integrating fires means synchronizing these assets with your maneuver units' infantry, armor, or scouts so that they hit the right target at the right time without fratricide or wasted rounds.

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Why should you, an NCO, care? Quite simply, fires are a force multiplier. A well-placed artillery strike can disrupt an enemy's advance before your squad even has a chance to engage. A poorly coordinated strike can leave your platoon exposed or, worse, hit friendly positions. At NTC, units that fail to integrate fires often get "killed" by the opposing force (OPFOR) because they can't suppress or destroy threats fast enough. As an NCO, you're not just executing orders: You're ensuring your soldiers have the support they need to win. That starts with understanding how fires work and advocating for them in the fight.

A lesson from NTC is that fires integration wins or loses battles. NTC is the closest thing to real combat that the Army can replicate. The Mojave Desert's unforgiving terrain, combined with a relentless OPFOR, exposes every weakness in a unit's ability to fight as a team and integrate enabling assets. Here's what NTC teaches us about fires integration at the BDE and below level, and why it's on you to make it work:

1) Speed saves lives. At NTC, units that integrate fires effectively move faster and hit harder. For example, during a 2023 rotation, a BN task force faced an OPFOR ambush in a narrow valley. The BN's fire support team (FIST), led by a sharp staff sergeant, had pre-planned targets based on likely enemy positions. When the ambush hit, the FIST called for 155mm artillery. The artillery impacted within minutes, suppressing the OPFOR and allowing the maneuver units to flank. The BN survived and conducted a counterattack. Contrast that with another rotation where a BN's NCOs did not prioritize fires coordination. The FIST did not have a clear understanding of the maneuver plan, and when the OPFOR attacked, it took 20 minutes to get effects on their target. The BN was overrun and suffered multiple casualties. As an NCO, you're often the one relaying critical information about enemy locations, friendly positions, or changes in the situation. Your ability to communicate clearly and quickly with the FIST or the BN Fires Cell can differentiate between a decisive win and a catastrophic loss. Train your soldiers to report accurate grids and understand calls for fire procedures. It's not just a fire support soldier's job; it's yours too.

2) Communication is everything. NTC rotations emphasize that fires integration lives or dies based on communication. The OPFOR loves to jam radios and exploit gaps in coordination. In one rotation, a company-level NCO failed to confirm that its mortar team was tied into the BN's digital fires network. When the company needed suppressive fire, the mortars were shooting blind, and rounds landed dangerously close to friendly forces. The after-action review (AAR) pinned the failure not on the mortar team but on poor NCO leadership at the Company level: the Platoon Sergeants who didn't ensure everyone was on the same page. You've got to own the comms plan. Make sure your radios are set, your soldiers know the frequencies, and everyone understands the fires chain of command. At NTC, units with NCOs who drilled comms discipline—checking batteries, rehearsing hand signals, and confirming digital links—consistently outperformed those who didn't. You don't need to be a signal expert, but you need to know enough to keep the fires network alive.

3) Terrain management and planning are your responsibility.

The desert at NTC mimics real-world battlefields where terrain dictates everything. Fires integration starts with understanding where you are and where the enemy is. In a 2024 rotation, a BN's NCOs worked with their FIST to map out areas of dead space where artillery or mortar effects couldn't reach due to hills or ridges. They adjusted their scheme of maneuver to ensure fires could cover the advance. The result was the BN neutralized an OPFOR strongpoint without taking heavy losses. Units that ignore terrain get pinned down in dead space, with no fires to assist them. As an NCO, you're often the one walking the ground with your platoon or squad. You see the terrain firsthand. Use that knowledge to inform fire planning. Report to your BN and talk to your FIST about where you're moving and what you need covered. Push your soldiers to mark targets and report obstacles. Your input shapes the fires' plan, and a good plan keeps your team alive.



U.S. Army Sgt. David Starling, alongside members of the Kosovo Security Force, work together to prepare target location information during command post exercise Dynamic Front at Grafenwöhr Training Area, Germany, Feb. 7, 2026. Dynamic Front is a training mission of synchronized command and fires planning, maneuvering through a complex landscape of assembly area operations, artillery acumen, and live firing drills. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Dylan Bailey)

Your Role as an NCO in Fires Integration

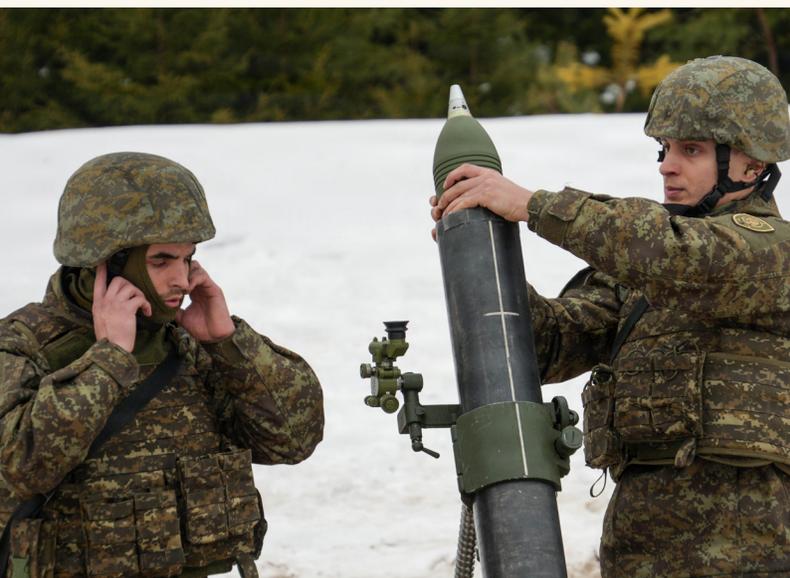
You might be thinking, "I'm not a fire support specialist. Why is this my problem?" This is a fair question. You're not calling in airstrikes or calculating ballistic trajectories, but you're the linchpin that makes fires work at the tactical level. Here is how you fit in: training your Soldiers. Your Soldiers are the eyes and ears of the BN. They are the ones spotting the enemy or marking friendly positions. At NTC, units with well-trained Soldiers are able to report an accurate 8- or 10-digit grid under stress, enabling faster, more accurate fires. Units with untrained Soldiers wasted time correcting bad calls, which gives the OPFOR the upper hand. Train your team on the basics: how to use a map, how to call for fire, and how to identify targets. Make

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it muscle memory. At NTC, the best units had NCOs who ran fire support drills during downtime, simulating calls for fire, practicing grid reporting, and rehearsing commo procedures. You don't need a fancy range; you need a map, a radio, and some initiative.

Bridging the Gap Between Maneuver and Fires

The BN staff and the fires cell can plan all day, but plans don't survive contact without NCOs to execute them. You're the link between the maneuver units and the fires assets. At NTC, successful BNs had NCOs who actively engaged with the FIST and the BN fires cell. They asked questions like, "What's the response time for artillery?" or "Can mortars hit that ridge?" They ensured their platoons' movements were synchronized with the fires plan. Don't just wait for orders. Talk to your FIST early and often. Understand the fires assets available: mortars, artillery, maybe even close air support. Know their ranges, response times, and limitations. Then pass that knowledge on to your soldiers. When the fight starts, you'll be the one making split-second decisions that tie fires to maneuver.



Members of the Kosovo Security Force load a mortar round during live fire training as part of command post exercise Dynamic Front at Grafenwöhr Training Area, Germany, Feb. 7, 2026. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Myenn LaMotta)

Leading Under Pressure

NTC will throw you curveballs: Comms will go down, the enemy moves unexpectedly, or the weather will screw up your air support. That's when your leadership matters most. In one rotation, a BN's fires plan fell apart when the OPFOR jammed their primary radio net. A quick-thinking Platoon Sergeant switched to a backup frequency, relayed the call for fire through a runner, and got rounds on target just in time to repel an attack. His initiative saved the platoon. You've got to stay calm and adaptable. Train your soldiers to handle chaos. Rehearse backup plans: hand and arm signals, alternate frequencies, or even physical markers for targets. At NTC, the OPFOR punishes hesitation. As an NCO, your ability to lead through uncertainty ensures fires hit when and where they're needed.

Practical Steps for NCOs to Own Fires Integration

Here's how you can take charge of fires integration at the BN and below level, based on what works at NTC:

- 1) Know your fires assets.** Learn what's available, whether it be mortars, artillery, drones, or air support. Ask your FIST for a rundown on effective ranges, response times, and ammo types. Share that with your soldiers so they know what to expect.
- 2) Drill the basics.** Make call-for-fire and grid reporting second nature. Use downtime to run scenarios: Have your Soldiers practice spotting a target, reporting it, and simulating a call for fire. Correct mistakes on the spot.
- 3) Own your terrain.** Walk the ground with your FIST or BN fires cell. Identify dead space, key terrain, and likely enemy positions. Mark them on your map and share them with the fires team. Your input makes the fires plan realistic.
- 4) Check your comms.** Test radios before every mission. Confirm frequencies, check batteries, and rehearse backup plans. At NTC, units with solid commo discipline always had an edge.
- 5) Build relationships.** Get to know your FIST and the BN fires cell. They're not just staff officers: They're your lifeline in a fight. Talk to them during planning, share your platoon's needs, and build trust.
- 6) Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse.** Run through the fires plan with your platoon. Practice synchronizing your maneuver with fires, such as when to advance and when to hunker down. At NTC, units that rehearsed were ready for the OPFOR's tricks.

The Stakes—Why This Matters

Let's be real: War isn't NTC. There's no AAR to fix your mistakes. If fires aren't integrated at the BN and below level, soldiers die. A missed artillery strike can leave your platoon pinned down. A bad grid can kill your guys or other friendly units. The enemy doesn't care if you're infantry, armor, or a fire support specialist; they're coming for you. Fire's integration gives you the edge to hit them first and hit them hard. At NTC, the OPFOR wins when units fight as individuals. They lose when BNs fight as a team, with fires and maneuver working together. As NCOs, we make that teamwork happen; we are the continuity of an organization that can create an environment of discipline and excellence. Soldiers look to us for guidance, and officers look to us for our expertise. Our leadership ensures they're trained, informed, and ready. When the rounds start flying, your ability to integrate fires can mean the difference between mission success and body bags.

NCOs Do Not Just Lead Soldiers

They shape the fight. Integrating fires at the BN and below level is not someone else's job; it's ours. NTC proves it time and again: Units that synchronize fires with maneuver dominate the battlefield. Train your soldiers, talk to your FIST, own your terrain, and lead under pressure. Every grid you report, every comms check you enforce, and every rehearsal you run will bring your team closer to victory. We NCOs must take charge of fires integration and make sure our soldiers come home. The battlefield doesn't care about your MOS: It cares about results. Get it done.

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