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IS THE COMBAT OUTPOST SYSTEM AS PRESENTLY TAUGHT  
AN ADEQUATE MEANS FOR PROVIDING THE BATTLE GROUP  
COMMANDER WITH EARLY WARNING OF THE ENEMY'S APPROACH?

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PREFACE

20 May 1958

The point of view expressed in this paper is that of the author and not necessarily that of the United States Army Infantry School or the Department of the Army.

  
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## INTRODUCTION

In any future ground hostilities, every officer in the Infantry Battle Group can expect to have certain obligations or responsibilities relating to the Combat Outpost. He may be in actual command of the Combat Outpost, may be responsible for its establishment or withdrawal, involved in planning fire support and coordinating patrols, or exploiting its capability as an intelligence collection agency. Therefore, it behooves all combat arms officers, especially Infantry officers, to know the mission and tactical employment of the Combat Outpost in varied types of terrain and combat situations.

This paper will cover the present-day concept of the employment of the Combat Outpost to include: the normal mission, its size and location on the battlefield, and its supporting weapons and communications. Annex A provides a visual representation of the present-day concept of employment. The tactical employment will be supplemented with examples of combat actions in Korea. Annexes B, C, D and E are visual examples of the combat actions in Korea. These examples can be useful to the Infantry officer of today because "limited conflicts" of this kind can well be the war of the future. This assumption is recognized by not only prominent military writers but the elder statesmen and leaders of the dominant world powers of today.

In short, the "limited conflict" is much more profitable to an aggressor than the all-out war because of the present atomic-thermo-nuclear stalemate.

Finally, conclusions will be drawn from the entire discussion and the analysis. Certain limitations confronted the author in that the great majority of pertinent action reports remain classified at this time.

Therefore, usable combat examples were limited, but of those available, an attempt has been made to present the pertinent aspects of the problem.

## DISCUSSION

To fully understand and appreciate the necessity of a well-established Combat Outpost line in either a position or mobile defense, perhaps a few excerpts about actual combat against a possible aggressor can best bring this to the fore.

"Practically every Russian attack was preceded by large-scale infiltrations, by an 'oozing through' of small units and individual men. In this kind of warfare the Russians have not yet found their masters. However much the outlying areas were kept under observation, the Russian was suddenly there, in the very midst of our own positions, and nobody had seen him come, nor did anybody see how whence he had come.

"But the amazing fact was that in spite of everybody being alert and wide-awake during the whole night, the next morning entire Russian units were sure to be found far behind our front line, complete with equipment and ammunition and well dug in.

"These infiltrations were carried out with skill, almost noiselessly, and without a shot being fired. Such infiltration tactics were employed by the Russians in hundreds of cases, bringing them considerable successes." (3:185)

As stated above, the Russian soldier is very adept at infiltration tactics. Not only is this true but the enemy in Korea was a master of stealth and ambush. Therefore, the Combat Outpost line must be organized and tactically employed so as to give the Battle Group Commander the earliest possible warning of the enemy's approach.

First of all, let us take a look at the mission and concept of operation of the Combat Outpost. This doctrine existed at the start of the Korean conflict and remains basically unchanged today.

The mission of the Combat Outpost can be broken down into six distinct requirements. They are as follows:

1. Provide early warning of the advance of the enemy.
2. Deny the enemy close ground observation of the battle position.
3. Delay the enemy.
4. Disorganize the enemy.
5. Deceive the enemy as to the true location of the battle position.
6. Inflict maximum casualties upon the enemy without engaging in close combat. (5:2)

This mission can be accomplished by creating the impression -- through location of outguards, the employment of weapons, tanks and supporting artillery and mortar fire -- that the Combat Outpost line is actually the forward edge of the battle area. To delay and disorganize the enemy, he is brought under fire at the earliest possible time, casualties inflicted, his tactical formation broken up to cause him to deploy prematurely. In order to obtain long-range fires and observation, the Combat Outpost is placed near the topographical crest of the dominant ground forward of the battle area.

The Combat Outpost is normally not one position but a series of outguard positions which are tied in by patrols, listening posts and sentinels covering the area forward of the forward edge of the battle area. (Annex A) The most desirable method is for the front-line companies to organize the Combat Outposts forward of their positions. Frequently the outpost is furnished by the reserve company, especially

if the Combat Outpost is fully motorized. The Combat Outpost varies in size from a platoon to a rifle company. This force may be reinforced with machine guns, mortars, recoilless rifles, tanks and reconnaissance elements; additional support of artillery, mortars and air being given from within or to the rear of the main battle position through contact with forward observers on the Combat Outpost. (5:3)

The Battle Group Commander is responsible for the establishment of the Combat Outpost. In the defense order, the Battle Group Commander includes instructions as to the general trace, strength and unit responsibility for the actual organization of the outpost. The Battle Group Commander will re-establish the Combat Outpost at the first opportunity after it has been forced to withdraw.

The Combat Outpost is located on or near the topographical crest of the critical terrain, forward of the battle position. If at all possible, it should be located to prevent the enemy from delivering effective flat-trajectory fire and ground-observed indirect fire on the battle position. It is desirable that indirect fire weapons located within the battle position be able to support the outpost and it should provide observation over terrain to the front. To meet the above requirements, the Combat Outpost is normally established about 1000 to 2500 yards forward of the battle position if the terrain dictates such an employment. (5:3)

To fully appreciate the tactical employment of the Combat Outpost line, one should know the definition of "outguard." An outguard is a small group of soldiers posted on a tactical locality to delay, disorganize and deceive the enemy and give early warning of his approach. The outguard's size may vary from half a rifle squad to a reinforced rifle platoon.

Outguards are employed in one echelon along the Combat Outpost line and are numbered from right to left. To ascertain from which position individual outguards can best accomplish the assigned mission, a detailed ground reconnaissance must first be accomplished. No attempt should be made to increase the frontage of units by increasing the intervals between individuals in an outguard. Control must not be sacrificed in order to occupy a wide frontage. Due to the fact that wide gaps exist between outguards, it is necessary that these gaps be covered by automatic weapons and prearranged mortar and artillery concentrations. (5:3)

Outguards should organize defense areas on terrain that affords excellent observation and long-range fields of fire, although it may be necessary to locate an outguard on terrain that does not meet these two desirable requirements in order to cover a specific approach into our area.

The Combat Outpost is normally supported by machine guns, recoilless rifles, mortars, tanks and artillery. If desired, the Combat Outpost can also be supported by air strikes. Machine guns are positioned on or near the topographical crest of the critical terrain being organized. Usually the Combat Outpost withdraws before engaging in close combat; therefore, grazing fire is not of vital importance. Machine guns are usually split and assigned a principal direction and sector of fire. (5:4)

The 106-mm rifles may be employed on the Combat Outpost when tanks are not available to cover critical high speed armor approaches into our battle position. The 57-mm rifles can be used to reinforce the long-range fires and have a primary mission of destroying grouped personnel and enemy crew-served weapons.

The 81-mm mortars support from their primary positions or from supplementary positions within the battle position. The 4.2 mortar also supports the Combat Outpost from its primary position within the battle position. To properly support the Combat Outpost by indirect fire, the mortars' top priority targets are defiles or ravines which afford the enemy excellent avenues of approach. The fires of the mortars are controlled by forward observers which are attached to the Combat Outpost for that specific purpose. (5:4)

Tanks are a definite asset when employed on the Combat Outpost due to their ability to deliver uninterrupted long-range fire against an enemy when the outpost is subjected to enemy artillery fire. The primary mission of the tanks is to destroy enemy armor and will normally support the Combat Outpost by direct fire. Although they may be used to cover the withdrawal of the outpost, they are an additional source of communication to the battle position and can be used to transport men and weapons to and from the outpost. The presence of tanks on the Combat Outpost will not only aid the outpost in the destruction of the enemy armor but is definitely a morale factor for the troops on the outpost. (5:4)

Artillery supports the outpost from primary positions except in unusual cases and artillery and mortar forward observers are located so as to obtain maximum coverage of the front. All weapons which are employed on the Combat Outpost and not organic to the unit organizing the outpost are attached to that unit organizing the outpost. These supporting weapons are provided close-in protection by riflemen. The above-mentioned weapons are usually employed with and in support of the Combat Outpost, but any and all weapons may be employed when the situation dictates that their usage would increase the combat effectiveness of the outpost line.

If outguards are widely separated, which will probably be normal in future ground operations, patrols between the outguards will be used to cover these gaps. If the outguards are not widely separated and the gap can be covered by listening posts, then the patrol is not necessary. Visiting patrols should also contact adjacent combat outposts. This contact is from right to left and can be coordinated between the Combat Outpost Commanders concerned.

The Battle Group Reconnaissance Platoon will normally be employed between the Combat Outpost and the general outpost line. The Combat Outpost Commander must have close coordination with the Reconnaissance Platoon Leader in order to make the patrolling effective between the two units and to avoid duplication of effort. Once the general outpost line is withdrawn, the Reconnaissance Platoon may return to its positions within the battle position or it may leave a portion of the platoon on the Combat Outpost to supplement patrols of that unit. (5:5)

Effective communication is of a dire necessity on the Combat Outpost line in order to accomplish the mission. Therefore, the five means of communication -- visual, sound, wire, radio and messenger -- must be used to the maximum advantage. With the wide and extended frontages of the battlefield of the future, effective communications will become a more predominant factor in the employment of units, and certainly that of a unit assigned the mission of organizing a Combat Outpost line. (5:5)

At the present time, the Infantry Platoon Leader is equipped with one AN/PRC-6 as his means of radio communication. This certainly is not an adequate means of communication if the Outpost Commander is to properly perform the

mission assigned and if he is to perform the duties required of him by the Battle Group Commander. There should be wire communication between each outguard in addition to radio communication. There should also be one or more telephone lines back to the company on the forward edge of the battle area who is responsible for the organization of the Combat Outpost line. Should these means of communication become ineffective, the mortar observers may be utilized if at all possible.

Plans for the withdrawal of the outpost are based upon a detailed reconnaissance of available routes and their location with respect to any successive delaying positions. All units on the forward edge of the battle area should be familiar with this plan. The Combat Outpost withdraws upon order of the Company Commander responsible for the organization of the outpost who obtains approval from the Battle Group Commander. The least engaged unit withdraws first and the withdrawal is supported by prearranged fires. The outpost should withdraw before becoming engaged in close combat with the enemy. (5:5)

The Battle Group Commander, in his order to the Company Commander, will state certain conditions under which the Combat Outpost will initiate its withdrawal, if it is out of communication. The Company Commander must insure that the Combat Outpost Commander is fully aware of the conditions under which he may withdraw and from whom he takes orders. The Battle Group Commander normally makes the decision to withdraw the Combat Outpost but he may delegate this authority to the Company Commander concerned.

Ground has been laid for examining some actual combat examples. Two actions have been selected for the discussion

and both have one key feature in common; namely, that the outpost had the mission either expressly or by inference of holding the position at all costs. In the first example, Hill 770, the outpost was held; in the second example, Outpost Eerie, it barely escaped complete destruction.

## HILL 770

This combat action involved Company B, 32nd Infantry Regiment, 7th United States Infantry Division, near Hwachon Reservoir, Korea, during the period 18-24 April 1951. (4:12-16)

On 18 April 1951, the 32nd Infantry, an attacking regiment of the 7th Infantry Division, stopped on a hill mass East of Hwachon Reservoir. The mission of the 32nd Infantry was to establish defensive positions along the high ground. The Company Commander of Company B sent a patrol forward along the ridge to his front with orders to reconnoiter the hill mass approximately 1000 meters forward of the MLR. The patrol moved out, returned shortly and reported that the hill mass (Hill 770) was occupied. (Annex B) The Company Commander ordered his 3rd Platoon Leader to occupy Hill 770 with his platoon, reinforced with one 57-mm recoilless rifle squad. The 3rd Platoon moved out and found that Hill 770 was unoccupied.

The 3rd Platoon established a perimeter fifty yards in diameter and consisted of open foxholes surrounded by a brush barricade. This barricade was placed forward of the line of foxholes approximately twenty-five yards. It consisted of bushes and scrub undergrowth which was left over when fields of fire were cleared. A few trip flares were placed outside the brush barricade and no other barriers were used to consolidate the position. The Platoon Leader established wire and radio communication with Company B and registered 60-mm mortar, 4.2 inch mortar and 105-mm Howitzer defensive fires on barrages and concentrations which he selected. He placed his light machine gun and the 57-mm recoilless rifle in positions so as to cover the most dangerous avenues of approach. (Annex C)

There was no enemy activity for four days and the outpost patrolled the area to their front daily. Small groups of the enemy were sighted but no action took place.

At approximately 0345 hours on the fifth night a trip flare on the north finger of Hill 770 revealed an enemy column approaching, fifty to seventy-five yards away. The Outpost Commander immediately called for and received 105-mm and 60-mm fires to be placed on this enemy column. The enemy column was also engaged by small arms fire from the platoon; meanwhile, another flare revealed an estimated sixty to seventy enemy soldiers crawling up the east and west slopes of the hill. Called in on this attack was 60-mm fire. The defenders held their individual weapons fire until targets were at an extremely short range and then fired. Mortar and artillery provided the bulk of defensive fires. Hand grenades were used extensively and no enemy succeeded in breaching the brush barricade.

The enemy withdrew at 0630 hours, enemy dead totalling eighteen with an estimated thirty to forty wounded. There were no casualties among the defenders and the estimated total enemy strength was 150.

At 2400 hours (23 April) the outpost was hit by fifteen to twenty rounds of 60-mm mortar fire and an attack was launched down the north finger of Hill 770 by an estimated force of fifty men. The assault was directed towards the machine gun. The gunner opened fire quickly but ceased fire and used hand grenades instead. No illumination was used during this attack and mortar and artillery fire were used successfully to break up the assault. The assault on the machine gun was beaten off and the defenders again held their small arms fire until close targets appeared. Hand and rifle grenades were used extensively by the defenders and no organized assault was launched, although sporadic fighting continued.

The enemy force withdrew in about one hour, leaving three dead and an estimated ten wounded. Later this force was identified as a North Korean Intelligence and Reconnaissance Platoon. The defenders suffered no casualties.

On the following day (24 April) the outpost was recalled to the MLR and Hill 770 was left vacant. The next two nights Hill 770 was plastered by heavy enemy artillery and mortar fire. On the second night, the unoccupied position was assaulted by an estimated two companies of enemy foot troops.

In the above-described action a lightly reinforced platoon was successful in holding an outpost against two enemy attacks, each by a numerically-superior enemy and at night. It was a highly successful action in that it accomplished all the normal missions of a Combat Outpost.

The dominant factors which contributed to this platoon's success are stated as follows:

1. A well tied-in perimeter defense.
2. An extremely effective obstacle brush barricade.
3. The well-judged withholding of small arms fire which would have disclosed individual positions.
4. Excellent communications.
5. Effective and timely supporting fires.
6. The absence of illumination which would have jeopardized the defensibility of the foxholes which had no overhead cover.

A number of other factors also contributed to the successful defense of Hill 770:

1. The enemy attack was apparently a raid or a probe and not a concentrated effort to seize and hold terrain.
2. No friendly reinforcement was required nor was a counterattack required.

3. The outpost was withdrawn prior to the main attack, which was made by two enemy companies and heavy supporting fires.

As seen from the combat action just described, a well organized and expertly commanded outpost can more than hold its own against unsupported enemy probes of superior strength. However, the same result cannot be expected when the enemy attacks with great strength, utilizes fire support to the utmost and is bent on seizing and occupying the position. The immobility and lack of staying power against a major concentrated attack can only invite defeat in detail of a Combat Outpost.

## OUTPOST EERIE

This combat action involved the 3rd Battalion, 179th Infantry, 45th United States Infantry Division near Chorwon, Korea, 21-22 March, 1952. (2:230-243)

Company K, 3rd Battalion, 179th Infantry Regiment, had the responsibility of manning Outpost Eerie which was located about ten miles west of Chorwon. The mission assigned to the outpost was that of furnishing security for the MLR and maintaining a patrol base. It was manned permanently.

Outpost Eerie was located about one mile north of the MLR and one and one-half miles south of the enemy OPLR. It was on the southern tip of a T-shaped ridge system and was dominated by other hills in the same ridge mass. (Annex D) The position was almost barren of vegetation and a valley separated Eerie from the MLR. Nine bunkers were placed in a perimeter around the top of the hill mass and a trench with firing positions encircled the hill top adjacent to the bunkers. (Annex E)

Outpost Eerie was occupied by two rifle squads, one light machine gun squad and one 60-mm mortar squad on 21 March. The total strength was twenty-six men, including the Outpost Commander who was the Platoon Leader of Company K's Third Platoon.

On the night of 21-22 March, two patrols were scheduled to operate from Eerie, Raider Patrol and King Company Patrol. Raider Patrol was to establish an ambush 600 yards north of Eerie on the east side of the ridge and capture a prisoner. Raider Patrol moved out from the outpost at 1900 hours with orders to return at 0200 hours. King Company Patrol also left Eerie at 1900 hours with the mission of establishing an ambush near Hill 191 about 600 yards northwest of Eerie.

Both patrols were to lay wire from Eerie and King Patrol was to return to the MLR at 0215 hours without passing through the outpost position.

The area was quiet until 2300 hours and then King Patrol reported six enemy setting up a machine gun near its ambush site. At the same time Raider Patrol reported an estimated enemy force of one platoon moving south. Raider fired on this group but the enemy ignored the fire and continued moving south toward Eerie. The Patrol Leader notified the outpost that he was withdrawing his force but failed to mention his route of withdrawal.

At approximately 2315 hours noises were heard outside the wire on the north of Eerie but these noises were thought to be those of King Patrol returning to the MLR. Ten minutes later Eerie was attacked when two trip flares were set off on the outer wire entanglement. The defenders opened fire with their automatic weapons and small arms, but the Outpost Commander ordered this fire ceased, thinking that King Patrol might have set off the flares. This thinking was clearly resolved when two enemy machine guns on Hill 191 (one reported by Raider Patrol) started firing grazing fire across the top of Eerie.

The Chinese were attempting to breach the wire in two places and the one machine gun on position alternated bursts of fire between the enemy machine guns and the threatened points on the wire.

When the firing started, K Company Commander called for prearranged mortar and .50 caliber machine gun fires. The Outpost Commander adjusted the mortar fire with good results and the .50 caliber machine gun forced one enemy machine gun to displace. An artillery concentration was placed on Hill 191 and for about forty-five minutes the attacks were held at bay outside the wire.

Illumination was provided by mortar and 155-mm Howitzer fire. The mortars ceased firing after a time due to an ammunition shortage. The 155 illumination was not effective to any degree because of consistently low air bursts.

At 0100 hours the enemy breached the wire at two points and at about this time semi-effective illumination ceased to exist. Prior to this, friendly casualties had been moderate but now they increased rapidly. The enemy moved in close to the northern bunkers and entered the trenches at several places. Close fighting with hand grenades and small arms was commonplace throughout the northern portion of the outpost. The men at the northern position soon ran out of AR ammunition and grenades and resorted to throwing weapons and magazines at the enemy onslaught.

When the enemy first breached the wire the outpost CF bunker was destroyed by a 57-mm round fired from a location north of Eerie and all communication with the MLR ceased. On the western side of Eerie a bitter hand-to-hand fight in the trenches was taking place and several defenders were killed or wounded. The Outpost Commander had moved to this position to keep the machine gun firing and was last seen hurling his carbine at an enemy soldier after exhausting his ammunition.

At 0120 hours the enemy had infiltrated the whole position and were in the trenches and on top of Eerie. At this time the Company Commander back on the MLR called for 105-mm proximity fuse fire directly on the outpost. This fire caused the enemy to withdraw before they had mopped up the two bunkers on the southern end of the position. The enemy withdrew to the northwest through a break in the wire.

At 0130 hours the Regimental Commander ordered the Company Commander to move the remainder of King Company out to the outpost. This force left the MLR at 0205 hours and arrived at Eerie at 0400 hours. After reaching Eerie they evacuated

the casualties and policed the area. At daylight a sweep of the ridge to the north was made and enemy dead were two inside the outpost and twenty-nine on the ridge to the north. Friendly casualties were eight killed, four wounded and two missing.

As can be surmised from the above combat action, a Combat Outpost barely escaped complete annihilation at the hands of an enemy force of slightly greater numerical strength. Nearly half the outpost lost its men in casualties. Some of the factors which influenced the outcome of the action are:

1. The enemy was able to gain the advantage of closely approaching the position without being recognized as a result of an oversight by a friendly patrol leader and/or an oversight on the part of the Outpost Commander.
2. The outpost lacked sufficient ammunition and hand grenades to conduct a sustained defense of any length of time.
3. The enemy attack was well supported by direct fire weapons and an aggressively fighting Infantry soldier.
4. Communications were knocked out early in the action, stayed out and almost all fire support was called for by the Company Commander who was on the MLR.
5. Illumination was ineffective.
6. Probably the proximity fuse prevented the destruction of the entire force. Nine out of twelve of the survivors were found in the southernmost positions, the only bunker that the Chinese had not mopped up when this fire was called in on the position.
7. The reinforcing time was almost two hours in which to move about one mile. The reinforcing unit closed on Eerie approximately four and one-half hours after the position was hit. By this time it was too late.

It is difficult to understand how Eerie could be expected to hold out against any sort of a determined attack. In this instance we find that isolation, lack of mutual support, insufficient strength, no communications at the critical time and an overly long reinforcing time all contributed to defeat in detail or piecemeal defeat. On Eerie, as on most outpost actions, the small unit leaders and their men fought courageously and valiantly but were incapable of salvaging a tactically unbalanced situation.

## CONCLUSION

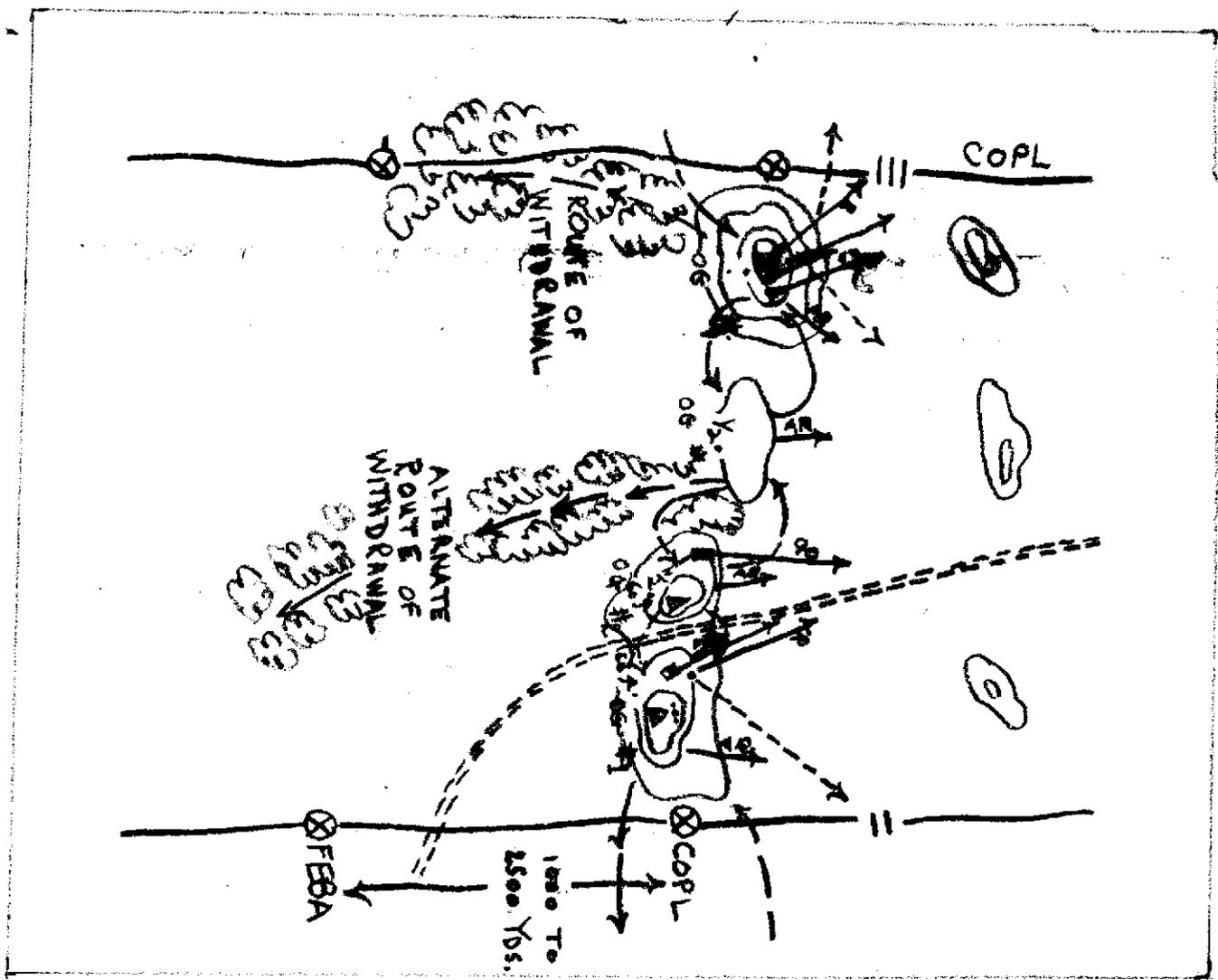
Any officer or individual in a position of responsibility in the Army can never expect to be confronted in combat with situations exactly fitting all the doctrines and principles that he has learned through past training, study or experience. Many times the following of one principle will conflict with the application of another. Although diplomatic and political decisions have a decided effect on the conduct of warfare, these factors have rarely proved our principles false. In fact, these outside factors point out that only by careful consideration of concepts and principles in their relationship to the situation can we arrive at sound military decisions.

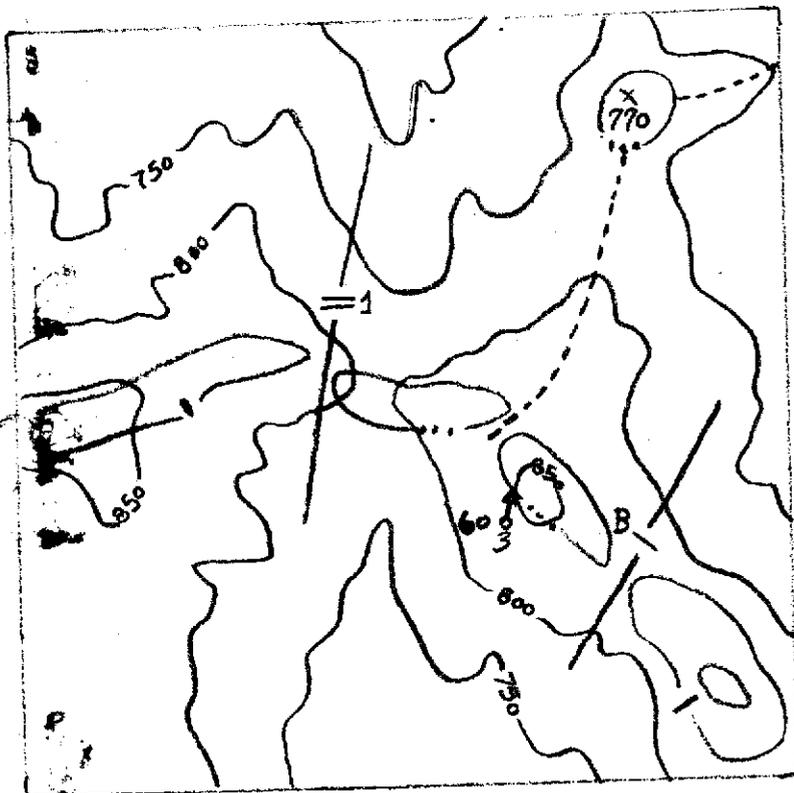
In Korea a situation arose wherein, in many instances, an additional mission was given to the Combat Outpost. That mission was holding the ground that they occupied. This was in conflict with their normal mission of inflicting maximum casualties upon the enemy "without engaging in close combat." Perhaps the decision to hold forward positions in Korea was justifiable under the circumstances; however, it could not logically be accepted as a general rule.

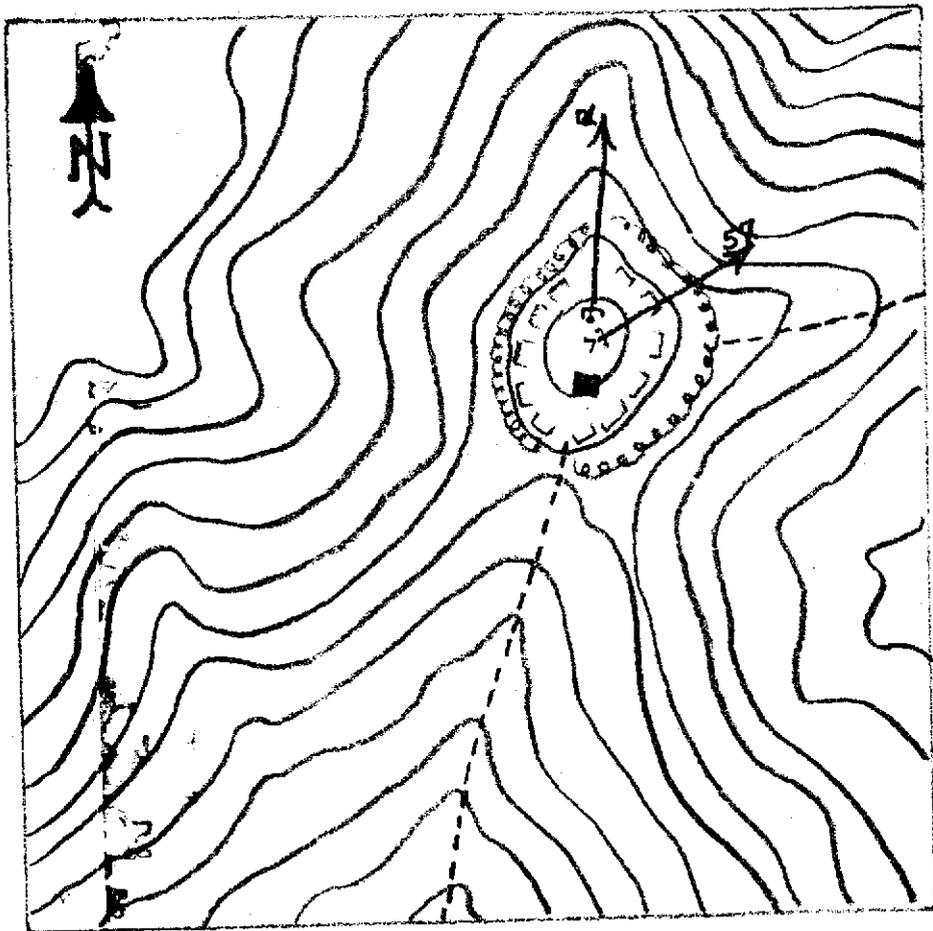
It is concluded that the current tactical doctrine and concept of the employment of the Combat Outpost is basically sound. Perhaps the two weakest points in the employment of the outpost is the communications aspect and the mobility of the personnel concerned. With the predicted wide frontages of the future the present-day communications organic within the rifle platoons are entirely inadequate to properly perform the required mission.

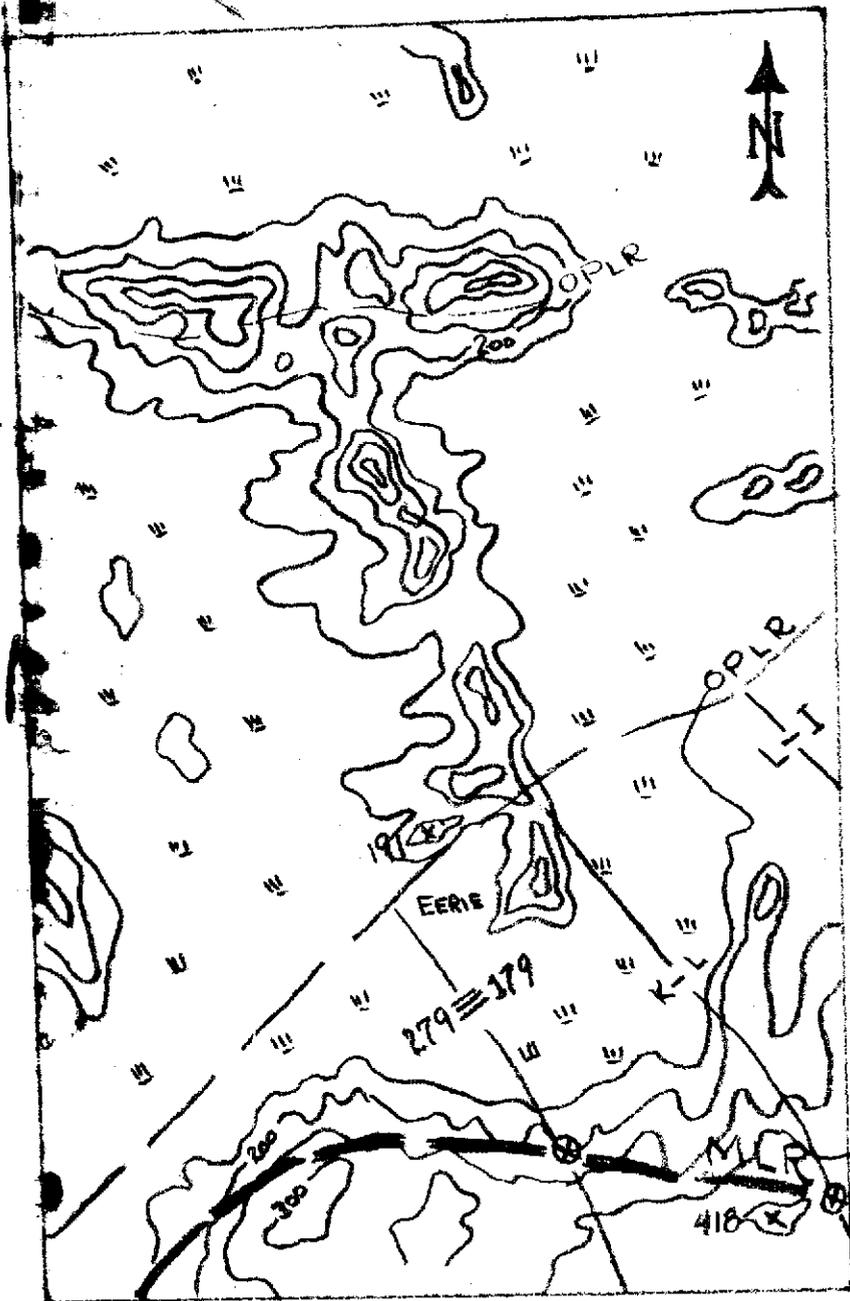
If the outpost cannot warn the Battle Group Commander in time of the developing situation, it has failed in its primary mission, that of warning. This communication is not only inadequate from the Outpost Commander to his superiors but also is inadequate within the outpost itself, with respect to communication between the outguards.

The mobility of the outpost is not adequate at the present time with the wide frontages and predicted type of fluid warfare in the future. Also, with these extended frontages perhaps the outpost of the future will have to be "beefed up" in order that they can properly perform their mission.

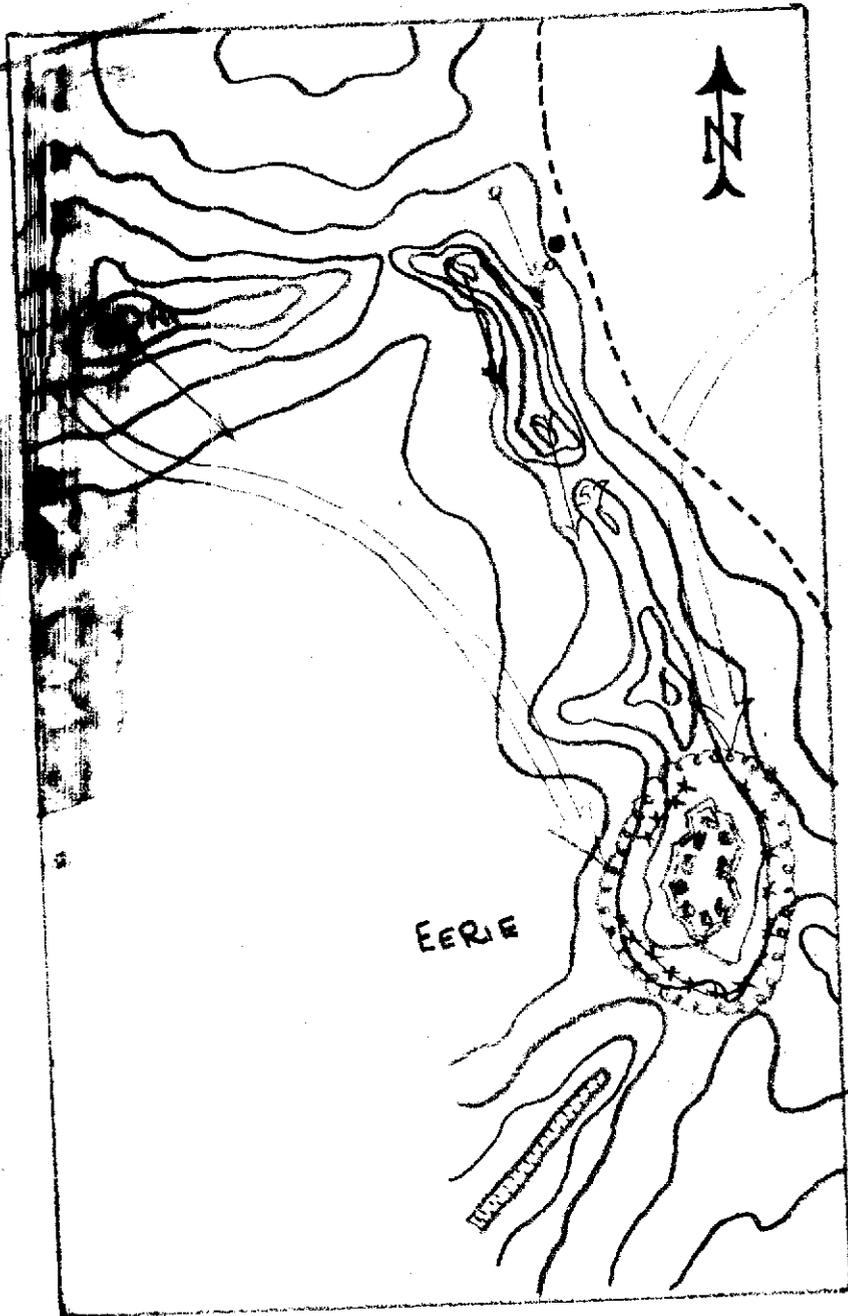








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