

Train as You Fight:

Adding the Cost of Attrition to MILES Warfare

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It was the evening of X6, six days into rotation Combined Resolve X (CBR X) at Hohenfels Training Area in Germany, and the 15 Main Battle Tanks of Delta Company, 1st Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment — U.S. Army Europe's opposing force (OPFOR) for training at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center — were postured in a hasty defense along two kilometers of rolling hills and dense forest. The plan was to delay and disrupt blue force's (BLUEFOR's) eastern advance, and then Delta Company would fall back east to establish a deliberate defense. My commander was composed and relaxed as he casually described his plan: Once Delta Company faced 30-percent attrition (a loss of four to five tanks), the company would retrograde. The commander ordered me to alert him when more than one tank was destroyed. Upon hearing my orders, I paused to reflect on the reality of this calmly spoken plan. Four or five tanks would be catastrophically destroyed, all crew members killed, before the remaining tanks would fall back and leave those burning tanks and fallen Soldiers behind. Three tankers would be dead before the commander was even awakened. Had anyone actually thought about the reality of this imminent loss of human life?

Unfortunately, this indifference towards death is commonplace when waging war with the Multiple Integrated Laser Engagement System (MILES) where Soldiers shoot each other with harmless lasers in lieu of bullets. On a MILES battlefield, death is a mere temporary inconvenience; thus, the cost of human life is inherently undervalued.



A Soldier assigned to 1st Battalion, 63rd Armor Regiment, 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division, engages a member of the opposing force during exercise Combined Resolve X at Hohenfels Training Area, Germany, on 2 May 2018. (Photo by SPC Dustin D. Biven)

Although the profession of arms often prioritizes mission accomplishment over individual safety, Army leaders are still human and will innately consider the risk to their Soldiers' lives when making decisions. Arguably, fighting with MILES trains leaders to think with a mission-first mindset, as my commander did on the night of X6 in CBR X. Unfortunately, those leaders are also being conditioned to give orders with complete emotional and tactical disregard for attrition, which does not fairly replicate wartime decision making.

From the Soldier perspective, fighting with lasers similarly alters tactical decision making. After Delta Company's retrograde and subsequent defensive stronghold, the platoons conducted engagement area development. As the plan developed, I realized the southernmost platoon's defense hinged on a bait tactic, a fairly common strategy on the MILES battlefield. Two crews of Soldiers were excited to lure the attention of imminent BLUEFOR in order to allow a fellow tank section to engage from heavily concealed positions. The bait crews staged in the center of an open danger area, directly facing the BLUEFOR avenue of approach with only a slight intervisibility line offering trivial cover. It was a suicide mission — one that the crews accepted without hesitation. BLUEFOR took the bait and the plan was effective, though unsurprisingly at the cost of those tank crews' lives. Perhaps in dire circumstances amidst a losing battle, leaders and Soldiers would agree that a bait tactic is worth the sacrifice. However, in actual war, leaders would likely consider alternative plans before concluding to use Soldiers as bait, and after that conclusion would certainly take substantial measures to mitigate the increased risk. To clarify, brave Soldiers have undoubtedly made sacrifices on real battlefields similar to what these two crews replicated, but such sacrifices are rare displays of unparalleled selflessness. However, this level of courage is typical on the MILES battlefield, and both sides of training rotations capitalize on Soldiers' disregard for death. The result is an unrealistic battlefield, swarming with Soldiers of unwavering braveness and a reliance on excessively risking Soldiers' lives.

Training with MILES severely alters leader and Soldier tactical decision making by drastically reducing the cost of Soldier casualties. However, assuming that the U.S. Army will continue replicating warfare through MILES, rotational exercises ought to artificially add consequences to Soldier losses. Training exercise planners must tailor the tactical scenario and exercise rules to restore some of the costs induced by attrition. These costs are generally broken into two categories — emotional and tactical. The emotional cost of attrition can never be accurately portrayed outside of actual war, thus a stressful and continuous training event is the best option to simulate emotional tolls on leaders.

The tactical cost of attrition is where training stands to improve most. In current rotations, when a Soldier is killed, he or she remains in place and is typically "dead" for four to 24 hours depending on ongoing operations. The Soldier then rejoins his or her main element. This death and revival concept supports reusing terrain, the reinforcement of BLUEFOR, and the replication of a larger OPFOR. Soldiers cannot remain incapacitated on the battlefield for the entirety of a training rotation since it would diminish that Soldier's training value, clutter the confined training area, and reduce the OPFOR combat power too quickly to adequately oppose BLUEFOR. However, there is room to improve the attrition process in order to improve tactical decision-making simulation.

Battles and engagements lasting longer than a few hours, spanning into multiple days, and fought with only remnants, would begin to add realism. By shifting the revival time beyond 24 hours and planning complex, multi-day engagements, leaders on the ground are forced to more heavily consider the impacts of Soldier casualties when devising a plan. Losing two tank crews in the first hour of a 48-hour battle will have a dramatic impact on the leader's subsequent tactics.

If revival was contingent on medical evacuation (MEDEVAC), leaders would face increased costs associated with losing Soldiers, which would further nudge their decision making towards reality.

A common rationale for reviving Soldiers rather quickly is that they replicate reinforcements. The departure from reality, however, is that the revived elements are organic to the unit and there is no reintegration process. If rotations require external reinforcements to bolster OPFOR or BLUEFOR combat power, then some additional augment units should be kept in reserve in order to reinforce an attrited front line. This reinforcement process adds complexity to leaders who now have to integrate new Soldiers into their ongoing mission rather than welcome back Soldiers who know the plan, have synchronized communications, and know their chain of command. This complexity translates into adding costs associated with Soldier attrition.

Army training events replicate contemporary warfare primarily through using MILES, which removes the cost of death from war. Consequently, leaders and Soldiers alter their battlefield decision making during training given their disregard for personal harm or the effects of attrition on future operations. While the concussing explosion of 120mm mortars or the painful grief of losing a platoon member will always be absent in force-on-force training, there are actionable steps leaders can take to improve training realism. Future training exercises should intentionally induce costs to replicate the effects of Soldier casualties. By having longer engagements with less revivals, conducting MEDEVACs, and reinforcing attrited units through external entities, training units will face greater costs associated with losing Soldiers; thus, decision making and behavior may closer imitate that of wartime.

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