

A Case for Delay

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As the United States charts its strategic course in an era of reinvigorated strategic competition, forward-deployed Army units face tactical and operational problems which have gone undertrained for a generation. In Europe and the Indo-Pacific, forward-positioned Army forces are severely outnumbered by the forces of our great power rivals and their allies. While great power competition occurs along a spectrum, with interstate conflict as one extreme, fighting to preserve the territorial integrity of allies remains the ultimate purpose of forward-deployed elements. In order for the joint force as a whole to fight and win in these dire scenarios, forward-positioned forces must be trained, organized, and equipped to conduct delaying actions to buy time for units from the continental United States to deploy to the theater. The doctrinal task of delay has been woefully undertrained in an era when its effect is once again at a premium.

Major exercises such as Defender Europe and Defender Pacific, among others, have indicated an increased focus on the logistical challenges involved in deploying units into combat across the vast distances of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. In addition to the practical lessons learned for Army planners, these exercises also have a signaling component that the United States takes its alliance commitments seriously. In order to credibly reassure nervous allies and deter potential aggressors, forward-deployed forces must be trained and prepared to buy the time required to bring forces from the continental United States into the fight.

Delay as a Task

Doctrine defines a delaying operation as “an operation in which a force under pressure trades space for time by slowing down the enemy’s momentum and inflicting maximum damage on the enemy without, in principle, becoming decisively engaged.”¹ The delaying force may execute a range of subordinate tasks ranging from area and mobile defenses to local attacks in order to force the enemy to slow their advance in order to mass combat power and maneuver on the retrograding force. In the delay, the delaying force displaces to subsequent positions before it can be decisively engaged by the enemy. This wears down the enemy until friendly forces meet their objective of establishing an effective defense or gaining the initiative and attacking. A delay can occur when the defending force does not have sufficient combat power to conduct other defensive tasks.²

Conducting an effective delay is not as simple as the sum of its parts. While subordinate units might be conducting more familiar tasks such as an area defense, synchronizing these operations to achieve the purpose of a delay, gaining time without incurring the destruction of the delaying force, is an intricate process that requires units and their staffs to

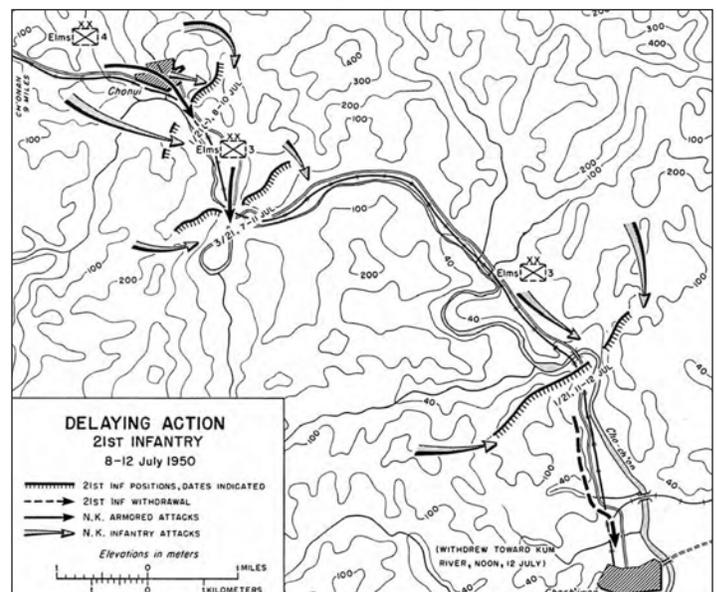
train specifically for that purpose. A delay requires more than simply bounding to subsequent battle positions; in fact, the close coordination required between units and their enablers leads doctrine to claim that “the delay is one of the most demanding of all ground combat operations.”³ While delay is a collective task assigned to units at echelons from platoon to corps, it is largely absent from large-scale training exercises.

History would caution against the Army neglecting the delay. Twice in the 20th century, the U.S. Army faced desperate delaying actions as its introduction into a major conflict: the North Korean offensive in the summer of 1950 and the Japanese invasion of the Philippine islands in December 1941.

Korea, 1950

On 25 June 1950, forces of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) launched an invasion across the 38th parallel. Republic of Korea (ROK) forces were quickly routed, and North Korean troops seized the capital, Seoul, in three days.⁴ Communist forces continued their drive south down the Korean peninsula, facing minimal resistance. The first U.S. Army force to arrive in Korea was Task Force Smith, an understrength battalion of the 24th Infantry Division which arrived in country piecemeal. These elements were the only available at the time, as they had been forward in Japan on occupation duty. After suffering a defeat in its first action at Osan, the extremely outnumbered 24th Infantry Division

Figure 1 — One of the Delaying Actions in the Opening Weeks of the Korean War



Graphic from *South to the Nakdong, North to the Yalu* by Roy E. Appleman

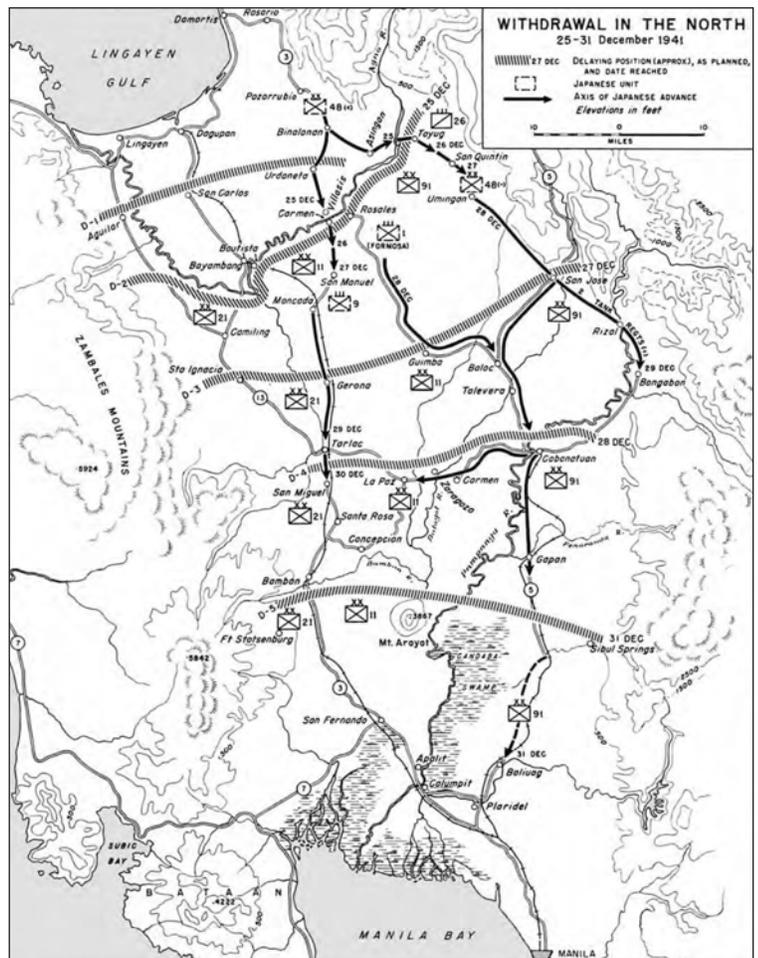
under MG William F. Dean began a delaying operation in order to buy time for follow-on forces to arrive.⁵ The arrival of the 1st Cavalry, 25th, and 7th Infantry Divisions (all forward deployed to Japan) fortified what became known as the Pusan perimeter, a foothold at the southern end of the peninsula where United Nations (UN) forces could mass additional combat power for a counterattack.⁶ Without this successful delaying action by the 24th Infantry Division, the speed of the North Korean advance would ensure the fall of the ROK before UN forces could deploy on the peninsula.

The Philippines, 1941

After crippling the Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, Japanese forces simultaneously launched attacks on British, Dutch, and American territories across East Asia. In the days that followed, Japanese forces landed at multiple points on the main island of Luzon.⁷ The defense of the Philippines was left to U.S. Army Forces in the Far East (USAFFE) under GEN Douglas MacArthur. The prewar plan for a war against Japan, War Plan Orange-3, included tactical guidance for a delaying action on Luzon should Japanese forces achieve a successful beachhead.⁸ MacArthur initially favored a more offensive plan to decisively defeat Japanese forces. Following initial setbacks, he reluctantly enacted War Plan Orange-3 and began a phased withdrawal across Luzon and eventually onto the Bataan peninsula.⁹ Despite achieving a prolonged delay, U.S. forces on the Philippines were forced to surrender on 6 May 1942.¹⁰ It took Japan six months of protracted fighting to capture the Philippines. The resources and manpower necessary to fight this extended campaign came at a detriment to their operations across the Pacific, ultimately upsetting timetables for future conquests.¹¹ While unsuccessful in retaining control of the Philippines, the effective delaying action fought by American and Filipino forces had a positive strategic impact across the theater.

Training to Delay

Units at the Army's Combat Training Centers (CTCs) do not typically conduct a delay at the brigade or battalion levels. This has not always been the case. In the 1980s, units frequently exercised scenarios based on delaying an advancing enemy force. In 1984, a series of articles in *Infantry* analyzed lessons learned from the nascent National Training Center (NTC) at Fort Irwin, CA. In recurring segments, the author analyzed four broad types of operations conducted at NTC: movement to contact, deliberate attack, area defense, and finally, the delay.¹² Choosing to elevate a retrograde task such as a delay equal to operations such as a deliberate attack or area defense may seem strange to many of today's leaders, but in the late Cold War this represented the reality faced by forward-deployed forces arrayed along the inner German border. To anyone serving in Europe at this time, the prospect of delaying Soviet tank armies surging through the Fulda Gap or across the North German Plain was the



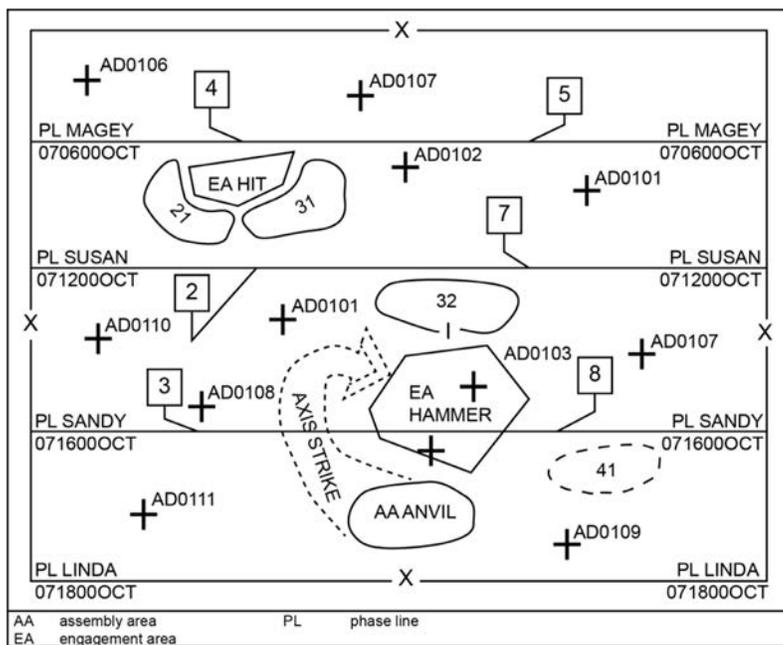
Graphic from *The Fall of the Philippines* by Louis Morton

Figure 2 — Map of USAFFE Delaying Positions in Support of War Plan Orange

organizing principle for most of their planning and unit training. Unless these forces could buy space for time, the Soviets would destroy NATO forces before reinforcements could arrive from the U.S. as practiced in the annual Return of Forces to Germany (REFORGER) exercise.

Today's strategic environment maintains an analogous requirement for forward-deployed units to delay attacking forces if they are to avoid total capitulation. In 2016, the RAND Corporation conducted an oft-cited series of wargames analyzing NATO's options for the defense of the Baltic states against Russia. In every iteration of the game, NATO players sought to delay the enemy advance by slowly giving up all but a minimal lodgment in the allied territory.¹³ Even when given additional armored brigade combat teams (ABCTs), they were consistently used in a delaying action to buy time for reinforcements to arrive.¹⁴ When NATO failed to delay Russian forces, they were forced to accept a fait accompli, leaving allied planners with the unenviable task of retaking an ally's lost territory. The wargaming team found this to be incredibly difficult militarily and fraught with opportunities for escalation.¹⁵

America's forward-deployed forces cannot merely be a tripwire. In Europe, Korea, and elsewhere, the units already



Graphic from Field Manual 3-90-1, *Offense and Defense Volume 1*

Figure 3 — Example Graphic Control Measures for a Brigade Conducting a Delay

in theater and those that arrive prior to hostilities must be trained to delay, or else force the Army to face the even more daunting task of penetrating prepared enemy defenses to liberate lost territory. The Army must prepare units for the task that most defenders face in the opening salvos of a conflict: delay. Doing so will signal reassurance to allies and deter adversaries who may doubt how seriously these forward-deployed forces are to fight to trade space for time. The Army may be fortunate enough to not put this training into action; history, however, suggests to err on the side of caution.

Recommendation

Deliberately training units and staff to conduct delaying actions will increase the survivability of forward-deployed Army elements in large-scale combat operations. The historical record shows that the actions of outnumbered units in the early days of a conflict can have outsized strate-

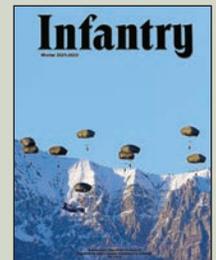
gic impact if they can successfully desynchronize the aggressor’s timetable. Training to buy space for time will also signal to both partners and rivals that the United States takes the prospect of fighting for allied territory seriously and has trained and prepared for the realities forward deployed forces would face. The Army must incorporate executing the delay as a major training outcome at its CTCs, particularly for units rotating to support forces in Eastern Europe and in Korea. Additionally, staffs at echelon must be familiar with the difficult requirements of a successful delaying action and train to meet them in planning and command post exercises regularly.

Notes

- ¹ Field Manual 3-90-1, *Offense and Defense Volume 1*, March 2013, 9-1.
- ² Ibid, 9-3.
- ³ Ibid, 9-2.
- ⁴ U.S. Army Center of Military History, *Korea 1950* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1997), 13.
- ⁵ Ibid, 15.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Louis Morton, *The Fall of the Philippines* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1993), 77.
- ⁸ Ibid, 63.
- ⁹ Ibid, 161.
- ¹⁰ Ibid, 572.
- ¹¹ Ibid, 583.
- ¹² Vernon W. Humphrey, “Winning at the NTC: The Delay,” *Infantry* (November-December 1984): 32-34.
- ¹³ David A. Shlapak and Michael Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO’s Eastern Flank: Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016), 8.
- ¹⁴ Ibid, 9.
- ¹⁵ Ibid, 7.

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