



DIGGING IN: PLATOON DEFENSE

LIEUTENANT EDWARD J. RUGGERO

Not long ago, the 25th Infantry Division in Hawaii introduced several new training concepts, one of which it called "Model Unit Training." This meant that one unit would be assigned to conduct training that would then serve as a doctrinal model for the other units in the division:

My unit (Company A, 1st Battalion, 21st Infantry) was assigned to create a model platoon in the defense. It would develop a deliberate defensive position, a semi-permanent site that could be used to introduce the leaders of the division's infantry units to the complexities involved in conducting a deliberate defense. In the next few weeks and months we were to learn a great deal about these complexities. In short, it proved to be an enormous task.

My unit was chosen because it had had some experience in the platoon defense while at Fort Lewis, Washington, where it had gone to participate in an exercise with the 9th Infantry Division. While this experience hardly qualified us as experts, we *had* learned two things from shivering through a 24-hour exercise: The deliberate defense, even at the company and platoon level, places a great demand on a unit's logistical support system (especially in light infantry units), and, second, because of the amount of strenuous work that has to be done in a limited time, the unit must strictly adhere to a definitive priority schedule of work.

The company's first job, therefore, was to find an appropriate location, a model position that would be generally applicable to all terrain, not just to the gulches

and the thick vegetation that are characteristic of the island of Oahu. Eventually, we found such a location: 300 meters of gently sloping, relatively even ground stretching from a woodline in the north to a deep ravine in the south. Using Field Manual 7-8, the unit went about planning and preparing its platoon deliberate defense in much the same way any platoon would.

In planning any defensive location, a company commander's guidance to a platoon leader first defines the platoon's sector by pointing out specific coordination points on the ground and assigning the general orientation of the platoon's crew-served weapons. The platoon leader's reconnaissance is most important, because his selection of positions determines the effectiveness of the platoon's fires and thus its survivability. In his reconnaissance, then, he must consider the following points:

Observation. The platoon leader and his squad leaders need to get down on the ground to see what their men would be able to see from their various positions. This is especially important for the platoon leader in positioning his crew-served weapons. It is also a continuing process; the leaders must get into each fighting position and observe its sector of fire as the riflemen would in a firefight.

Cover and concealment. The best place from which to inspect cover, concealment, and camouflage is from the enemy's viewpoint. The squad leaders should lie on the ground a hundred meters from their positions to see if they can hit the occupants with grenades or rifle fire, and should have their soldiers do the same.

The platoon leader should not limit himself to considering the close-in attack. If there is a concealed position 1,100 meters away, for instance, from which an attacker could place tank rounds into the platoon's defensive positions, the leader should know about it. In combat, reconnaissance that far forward of friendly lines may not always be practical, but if it can be done, the platoon will be better prepared.

Obstacles. Natural obstacles are very important, but they are not always obvious. Man-made obstacles such as wire, minefields, and automatic ambushes must be carefully integrated with the natural obstacles into the platoon's fire plan.

Key terrain. Looking at things from the attacker's viewpoint gives the platoon leader an idea of the terrain the enemy will want to control, the same terrain that he must be denied.

Avenues of approach. The platoon leader must be concerned with all possible approaches, because a determined enemy that is denied easy access will find another route, no matter how difficult. The leader's job is to focus on the most likely avenue of approach to his position and to prepare for the unexpected.

In this process of finding and preparing a platoon defense, the rifle squad leader also has a number of decisions to make. Once assigned a sector, he must place his soldiers so that their fires will supplement the fires of the platoon's crew-served weapons. He should position his

automatic riflemen so that they can fire into the sectors that are not covered by the machineguns. Because grazing fire is just as important for the automatic riflemen, they, like the machinegun crews, must walk their entire sectors to determine any dead space. The squad leaders must also have their grenadiers pace the distance to targets within their sectors of fire. When each squad sketch reflects the careful integration of weapons and interlocking fires, the platoon leader is better able to see that his front is secure. He must also know the sectors of fire and the types of weapons in the adjacent positions.

After taking all of these principles into consideration, our unit began constructing our model positions, following the guidelines in FM 7-8. Two of the soldiers were allowed to make one modification: they constructed overhead cover in the center of their position as well as on either side. This gave them excellent cover from indirect fire without severely limiting their observation of their sector.

One of the tests the squad leaders conducted as the troops were finishing their positions was to toss training grenades in each one while the men manned their weapons. As a result, several of the positions constructed in the crescent shape proved too large for just one grenade sump, and their occupants decided to build additional sumps.

Individual marksmanship was a major consideration in tailoring the positions to their occupants. Limited visibili-



ty firing devices, although a great help at night, only got in the soldiers' way as they attempted to engage targets in the daytime. For this reason, the platoon decided to use only short aiming stakes that marked a direction of fire but did not support the weapon or interfere with daylight firing. As a further improvement, sandbags were placed in front of the position to give the riflemen a stable firing platform. Finally, the friendly sides of the aiming stakes were marked with luminous tape to help the riflemen identify them at night.

After individual positions had been prepared, alternate positions were assigned for the entire platoon. Supplementary positions were also designated by the platoon leader, with sectors of fire that could cover the platoon's flanks or rear in the event an adjacent unit was overrun. One-man positions were prepared, since they would most likely be occupied at the same time the primary positions were being manned. The work on these positions included only locating the positions, constructing and camouflaging the frontal berms, and placing the sector stakes.

OBSTACLES

Elaborate wire obstacles were constructed forward of the defensive position. Closest to the trace was the protective wire, a triple-strand concertina barrier that extended around the entire position. Gaps in this wire were made by overlapping the segments so that anyone entering the gap would have to move parallel to the platoon's front for 20 meters or more, thus exposing himself to the platoon's fire. It was found that painting the concertina with subdued paint at least made its exact lay difficult to determine when observed from the front.

Tactical wire was run parallel to the machineguns' final protective lines from the protective wire to the point at which the lines intersected. This barrier was made of two sets of triple-strand concertina on one side and two sets of double-apron wire on the other. Supplementary wire, tied in with the tactical wire and extending in great arcs toward the enemy, was intended to channel approaching infantry toward the machinegun FPLs. Hasty protective minefields were mixed in with the wire.

The gulch that surrounded the defensive position was marked with only one or two trails through what was otherwise almost impassable underbrush. These trails were covered by automatic ambushes in which a PRC-77 battery would be used to detonate a "daisy chain" of claymore mines. These booby-traps, since they could not be observed from the trace, were rigged with anti-handling devices. Trip flares and simple noise-making devices, especially in the wire, completed the obstacle plan.

An observation post (OP) was located well forward of the platoon trace and astride the main infantry avenue of approach, a ravine that led to the platoon's right flank. The men occupying the OP had to dig that position as

well as their own positions on the platoon trace. (These soldiers were rotated frequently.)

In addition to their individual weapons, the team manning the OP was equipped with a map and a compass (for adjusting indirect fire), night vision devices, and wire communication directly to the platoon leader's position. Their withdrawal route through the minefield was marked with engineer tape staked down at both ends. Once they started to withdraw, they would remove the first stake from the ground but leave it in place. Then when they reached the other end of the minefield, they would simply grab the tape and pull it out of the minefield as they moved so that the safe lane would not be marked for any pursuers.

The platoon was now ready to begin the equally important phase of rehearsal and contingency planning. The first priority was fire control. Machinegun crews were carefully instructed to fire only on command from the squad leader who controlled that sector. In this way, the platoon leader could make sure his machineguns would not reveal their positions to an enemy reconnaissance by fire. A concentration of fires could be accomplished by voice commands and by the use of target reference points that were known to all platoon members, or through the use of tracers by squad and team leaders. As they always should, the subordinate leaders kept on hand several magazines loaded only with tracer rounds for use in designating targets.

For communications, the squad and platoon leaders were instructed to keep their phones to their ears so they would not miss anything in the noise and excitement. In addition each squad had a standard format for reporting its overall status after each engagement. Each squad leader established a reporting pattern and taught it to his men so they could quickly and concisely report their ammunition status (including hand grenades, LAWs, and claymores) as well as any casualties.

As an additional communication device, communication wire was rigged for use as tug cords between the squad leader's position and those of his squad members. This device proved especially helpful at night, when a tug on the cord could be used to assure each party that the other was awake.

RESUPPLY

The platoon's members found that one of the trickiest aspects of making the defense work was resupply, in and out of action.

The starting point for stockpiling ammunition was the basic load for each weapon with every man maintaining a basic load of ammunition in his position. The squad leaders kept an additional basic load for their squads in or near their positions. Finally, the platoon sergeant maintained a basic load for each platoon member in a position separate from but near his own.

Extra rations and water were handled in a similar way:

The platoon sergeant issued two meals to each man, with instructions to eat the meals 12 hours apart unless they were told otherwise. The squad leaders kept two meals per man and five gallons of water at their storage positions; the platoon sergeant did the same.

Too, the platoon leader designated a rest area in a covered and concealed location behind the trace where the platoon's members could go to get a hot meal or to relax and stretch their muscles.

Evacuation plans were rehearsed so that the withdrawal to alternate or supplementary positions would be orderly and well controlled. The plan was for one man from each position to move to and occupy his alternate or supplementary position on signal. The men were given a chance to rehearse moving in both daylight and darkness under simulated enemy fire. This way, if the platoon had to defend its flank from its supplementary positions, the platoon leader could get fire to that sector quickly. The crew-served weapons also had alternate and supplementary firing positions.

The evacuation of wounded soldiers was a contingency that also had to be considered. The leaders asked themselves such questions as Who helps the casualty from his position when the platoon is under attack? and How serious a wound will require that a soldier be moved, even under fire?

Every platoon member had to know the location of the platoon medic and the casualty evacuation point. Each of the team leaders prepared field expedient litters from ponchos and long branches or trees. These litters were placed behind the team leader's positions and then camouflaged.

SECURITY

Security, which had been foremost in the platoon leader's considerations from the beginning, also had to be considered at this point, including security patrols and surveillance. Patrolling forward of a friendly defensive area is always a risky operation that requires thorough planning, careful coordination, and near-flawless execution. Not only must patrol leaders be competent, the unit leader through whose position a patrol must pass either going out or coming in must have excellent control of his men.

Plans had to be made, too, for the supervision of the soldiers who would pull security from their individual positions, especially at night. In addition to tug cords attached to the wrists of each sentry, all the soldiers who were assigned a security mission during the hours of darkness were provided with night vision devices mounted on their weapons, as far as this was possible. The OP had first priority for the available devices, with the squad leaders next.

(On a real battlefield, the debris generated by a unit can also be used to construct passive security devices. Fuel drums and ammunition packing cases can be filled

with "foogas," primed with detonating cord, and placed at various points in the wire obstacles. Plastic explosives and thermite grenades, rigged as automatic or command-controlled devices, can also be used for this purpose.)

When the platoon had completed its training on the model site, briefings were held at the site for all the division's infantry officers, from company commanders on up. The battalion and company commanders of the unit that built the site and conducted the training discussed their respective roles in the process. Then the platoon leader briefed the group while walking the platoon trace and pointing out the significant features of the defensive area. Certain aspects of the fire and barrier plan had been marked to make them readily identifiable. For example, colored wooden panels and engineer tape identified the squad sectors of fire, the indirect fire targets, and the final protective fires.

The company's leaders also discussed their logistical requirements and made some important points about the inadequacies in the basic load design for the battalion. For example, 300 rolls of concertina wire had been stretched among more than a thousand engineer pickets. A thousand sandbags and more than 500 feet of heavy planking had gone into the individual fighting positions. These amounts come close to being an entire battalion's allowance for barrier material.

A lot of manpower had also been required — about 1,900 manhours. This equates to a full-strength infantry platoon working on its positions full-time for the first 24 hours of occupation and 12 hours a day thereafter for about ten days.

The response from the division's leaders was encouraging. Except for some of the Vietnam veterans, few of the officers had ever seen such a complete defensive position. The company had simply applied current Army doctrine and carried it out on the ground to an extent not usually seen in training.

The attention to detail and the enormity of the effort involved in the preparation of the site has done much to promote even more imaginative thinking and planning within the division. Several units have used the site for training their junior leaders and soldiers, and as more people are exposed to it, more and better ideas continue to come forward.

Field Marshal Erwin Rommel once observed after a battle that "the biggest mistake the enemy made was in not looking at his defensive positions as the attacker would." That is the principle the platoon applied. After the site was completed, its members, looking at their handiwork from the enemy's vantage point 500 meters away, had a hard time picking out their own positions. As a result, they were all confident in their ability to hold that defensive position.

LIEUTENANT EDWARD J. RUGGERO graduated from the U.S. Military Academy in 1980, after which he completed the Airborne and Ranger courses. Since then, he has served with the 1st Battalion, 21st Infantry "Gimlets," first as a rifle platoon leader, then as a support platoon leader, and now as executive officer of Company A.
