

TRAINING NOTES



Winning at the NTC: The Fight in the Gullies

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EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the first in a series of articles on training at the National Training Center at Fort Irwin. The opinions expressed are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Defense or any element of it.

During the past two years, United States Army units have fought more than 200 battles against a Soviet-style opposing force (OPFOR) under conditions so real that their initial effect was as shattering as actual combat. Month after month, mechanized infantry and armor task forces continue to arrive at the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, California, to undergo 14 days of intensive, non-stop combat against a "Soviet" regiment — actually two highly trained U.S. Army battalions equipped with a mixture of real Soviet equipment and U.S. equipment that has been modified to look and perform like the real thing. During that period, each battalion fights about eight engagements — with force ratios similar to those the Army expects to face in any future war — using the multiple integrated laser

engagement simulation system (MILES). In addition to these engagement simulations, each of these units conducts three battalion-level live fire exercises.

These battles in the California desert are *real*, for they duplicate as closely as possible the kind of fighting the Army will face in a future mid-intensity war. They provide, in fact, an acid test for our training, equipment, doctrine, and tactics.

So far, many of the U.S. task forces are experiencing difficulty maneuvering and defending against the well-disciplined and well-trained OPFOR. Ideally, of course, every battalion that goes to the National Training Center should be able to accomplish every assigned mission, destroy the OPFOR in the process, and do this without unacceptable losses. In this series, actual battles the battalions have fought at the NTC will be analyzed, as will the factors that proved decisive for one side or the other.

The first of these battles was a movement to contact in which the OPFOR was encountered well short of the point where the U.S. force commander expected to make contact. The latter's plan did not have the

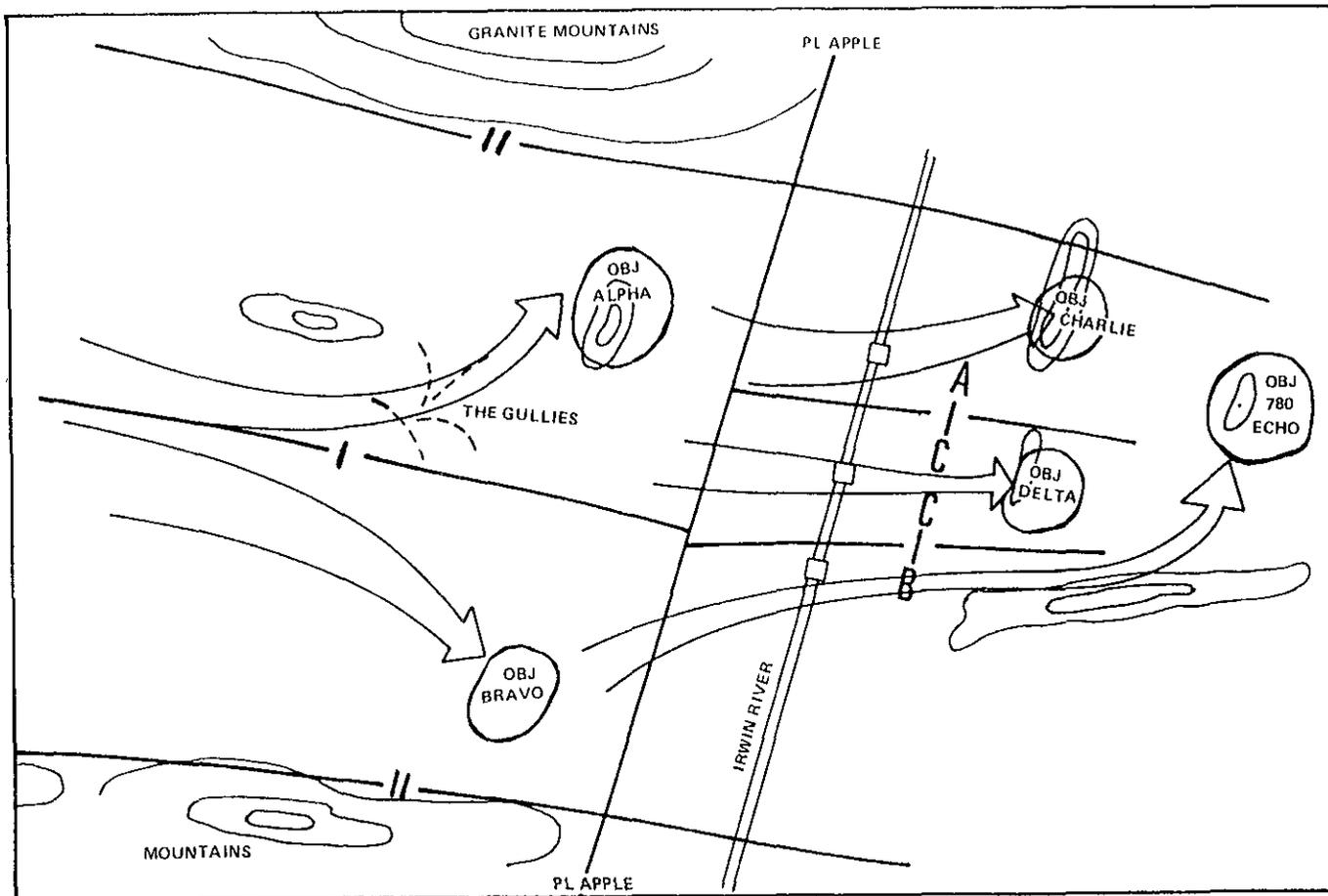
flexibility and the balance needed to meet such an eventuality, and the task force was unable to mount an effective hasty attack.

The Mission

The U.S. battalion's mission was to conduct a movement to contact to the east to seize Hill 780 and to be prepared to continue the advance to the east (see accompanying map).

The Terrain

The zone assigned the battalion was about 17 kilometers wide and 20 kilometers long. The Granite Mountains in the north (left) are virtually impassable by vehicle except through recognized passes. The south (right) boundary of the zone is also mountainous, but there are more frequent and wider gaps. The key terrain in the zone includes the high ground on both sides of the "Irwin River" (really a road with designated "fording" sites) and the fording sites themselves. Visibility is excellent throughout the zone, and the mountains offer many



sites for observation posts. Wadis, or dry streambeds, offer excellent high-speed avenues of approach into and through the zone. Innumerable gullies, dry streambeds, and hillocks offer excellent cover and concealment.

The U.S. Plan

The battalion's plan called for its scouts to move out an hour ahead of the rest of the unit. The battalion was to advance with two companies — one pure mechanized infantry company (Alpha) and a mechanized infantry heavy team (Bravo) — abreast. A tank team (Charlie) was to follow, forming a battalion V formation. The company commanders also adopted V formations.

March objectives were assigned to the leading teams, but in most cases the objective assigned to one team was out of supporting range of the objective assigned the other team. As the

battalion neared the "Irwin River," the plan called for Team Charlie to come on line. The battalion would then advance with its three combat units abreast.

Execution

The OPFOR consisted of a motorized rifle company reinforced by a T-72 tank platoon.

The first contact for the U.S. units came on the left flank, where Team Alpha encountered a mixed security force of one T-72 tank and two BMPs. Because the scouts had not located his force, the OPFOR commander allowed the scouts to pass unmolested. The OPFOR then opened fire on the flank of Team Alpha and destroyed the left flank platoon, which was moving in formation and not using overwatch. (In fact, there was *no* use of overwatch at any level.)

The trailing platoon in Team Alpha came abreast of the destroyed platoon

and was destroyed in turn. The team's right flank platoon continued to move, holding its position in the now non-existent company formation. Finally, this platoon decided to take up a perimeter defense; it made no attempt to establish physical contact with the survivors of the other two platoons.

The OPFOR took advantage of this by driving into the two destroyed platoons and machinegunning the survivors. It then plunged into a maze of gullies and bypassed the surviving platoon, which could see part of this action but did nothing to prevent it. When the OPFOR platoon came to a halt, its position was revealed by heat-waves rising from its exhausts.

In the meantime, the OPFOR had also spotted Team Bravo on the battalion's right flank. Although Team Bravo was in a position to outflank the OPFOR, it was out of supporting range of Team Alpha. The OPFOR assigned a platoon to snipe at Team Bravo, and its superior gunnery made

this an effective economy of force move. This action also allowed the OPFOR to concentrate on the destruction of Team Charlie.

As Team Charlie came up, it moved past the remnants of Team Alpha. Alpha's surviving leader joined Team Charlie but told the team's leader nothing about the OPFOR platoon that was lurking in the gullies just ahead.

As Team Charlie entered the gullies — still in formation — it was engaged at close range by the mixed OPFOR platoon. As the team attempted to overwhelm the OPFOR, it was hit in the flanks by the remainder of the OPFOR, less the platoon that was holding off Team Bravo.

Team Charlie was destroyed, and the OPFOR turned on the tattered remnants of Team Bravo.

Analysis

The U.S. action showed many shortcomings. To begin with, the plan had three major errors:

- It called for too many units forward. It did not call for using the smallest possible element to make contact. Instead, it insured that most of the battalion's combat power would be tied up on an initial contact.

- It put companies out of supporting distance of each other, and allowed the OPFOR to concentrate on the piecemeal destruction of the teams.

- It did not provide a balanced disposition for dealing with unexpected happenings.

Thus, the scouts failed to find the OPFOR; the lead teams compounded this error by moving in mounted formations, which did not provide any real security and allowed two platoons to be shot up while still in their carriers.

Command and control was poor. Bounding overwatch was not used, primarily because the command and control system lacked the ability to adequately coordinate the movement of the subelements.

When the fight began, the bat-

talion's leaders reacted sluggishly. Most of what happened "just happened." Leaders and commanders did not control or maneuver their units. No one seemed to have a clear idea of what was happening, and no one passed along any information.

The U.S. force underestimated the threat presented by a single platoon-sized security element, although it was backed up by the rest of the motorized rifle company.

How It Might Have Gone

In considering an alternative approach, a slightly different scheme of maneuver could have been used with one team leading and the other two alternating overwatch roles. Instead of march objectives, there could have been lots of checkpoints, which would have facilitated command and control and made it easier for leaders to maintain close control over supporting fires and maneuver elements as the battle developed. In any case, small security elements should be treated with respect.

The initial action on contact should have been to suppress the OPFOR. That's the sole mission of the leading team — suppress, develop the situation, and report back.

The next step should have been to isolate the OPFOR platoon. With the initial OPFOR positions suppressed, and with a clear idea of the size, composition, and location of the OPFOR, the reserve team could have maneuvered to interpose itself between the OPFOR platoon and the rest of the OPFOR.

With the OPFOR platoon isolated and suppressed, one team should have been ordered to attack and destroy it. Both of the other teams could have supported this attack by contributing their fires. Thus, the OPFOR platoon would have been forced to face suppressive fires from two directions while defending against an attack from a third direction. The remainder of the OPFOR unit would have been unable to come to the platoon's assistance. The U.S. force would have

seized the initiative and concentrated overwhelming force at the point of decision, and then could have defeated the OPFOR in detail.

LESSONS

A number of lessons can be drawn from this one engagement:

- It is an old truism, but a valid one, that no plan survives contact. Once contact is made, the battle must be fought by timely and continuous command and control.

- Units that are out of range are out of support. A gap of more than 2,500 meters between its companies exposes a battalion to defeat in detail.

- Mutual support can be accomplished only by the commander actively maneuvering his units. While the use of checkpoints and other control measures facilitates this, nothing can substitute for direct control.

- In a movement to contact, the OPFOR must be made to expose itself while the U.S. force still has enough uncommitted forces to take advantage of any OPFOR weaknesses.

- Once contact is made, a commander must ask himself: "Where is the parent unit of the force I am engaging?"

- In tank country, tanks lead. In infantry country, dismounted infantry leads. To put mounted infantry in the lead is to send lightly armed and armored vehicles into country where even tanks might fear to tread.

Initiative doesn't mean that each soldier is expected to come up with a brilliant solution to each tactical problem. It means that each soldier should know what his unit's mission is and seek ways to accomplish that mission.



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