

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE HILL

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Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington, once said: "All the business of war, and indeed all the business of life, is to endeavor to find out what you don't know by what you do; that's what I called 'guessing what was at the other side of the hill'."

He probably understood the business of war better than most of his contemporaries, and he was, moreover, a master of defense who, through the judicious use of reverse slope positions, often surprised and attacked in turn his out-guessed opponents. At Waterloo, for example, he concealed the bulk of his forces behind a ridge, from which Picton's division rose to blunt the initial French attack by delivering — at 40 paces — a withering surprise volley upon the French assault columns as they disorientedly topped the crest.

In World War I, the Germans often based the main line of resistance of their innovative defense in depth on a *Hinterhang*, or reverse slope. By World War II, the reverse slope position assumed such tactical practicality that Captain H.W. MacDonald of the 11th Canadian Armoured Regiment unhesitatingly spoke of the amateurishness exhibited by the Germans in their selection of a defensive position near Arnhem in 1945 with the words, "They'd dug-in on the wrong side, facing us." (The Germans in the Western Desert and in Northwest Europe, though, did make extensive use of reverse slope positions.) He stood off and destroyed his opposition with longer range weapons, just as the British did the

Argentinian forward slope positions in the Falklands War, a conflict that again confirmed the vulnerability of such deployments. Properly sited reverse slope positions would thus appear to retain their traditional tactical potential, and they may offer some practical means for stalling the advance of Warsaw Pact armored forces.

The major advantage of a reverse slope position is that the topographical crest affords it concealment. Enemy direct fire, consequently, cannot be brought to bear on it, and the lack of ground observation limits the accuracy and the neutralizing effect of enemy mortars and artillery as well. Given the reported World War II dictum that "a located section post can be a death trap for the men in it," this becomes a particularly important tactical consideration indeed.

It should be noted, however, that a reverse slope position need not necessarily be physically located on a reverse slope; in fact, to force an enemy to attack uphill, it could be sited on a "reverse forward slope." The determining factor is that its *fires* must fall on the reverse slope to the extent that this area can be converted into an inferno of fire if and when the enemy reaches it. Admittedly, this tactical disposition often may be difficult to attain, but it will, in any case, tend to whittle down the armament range advantage of armored forces to that of the man-packed weapon, thereby giving the edge to an essentially infantry short-range defense (see sketch).

Ideally, a reverse slope position itself should not lack

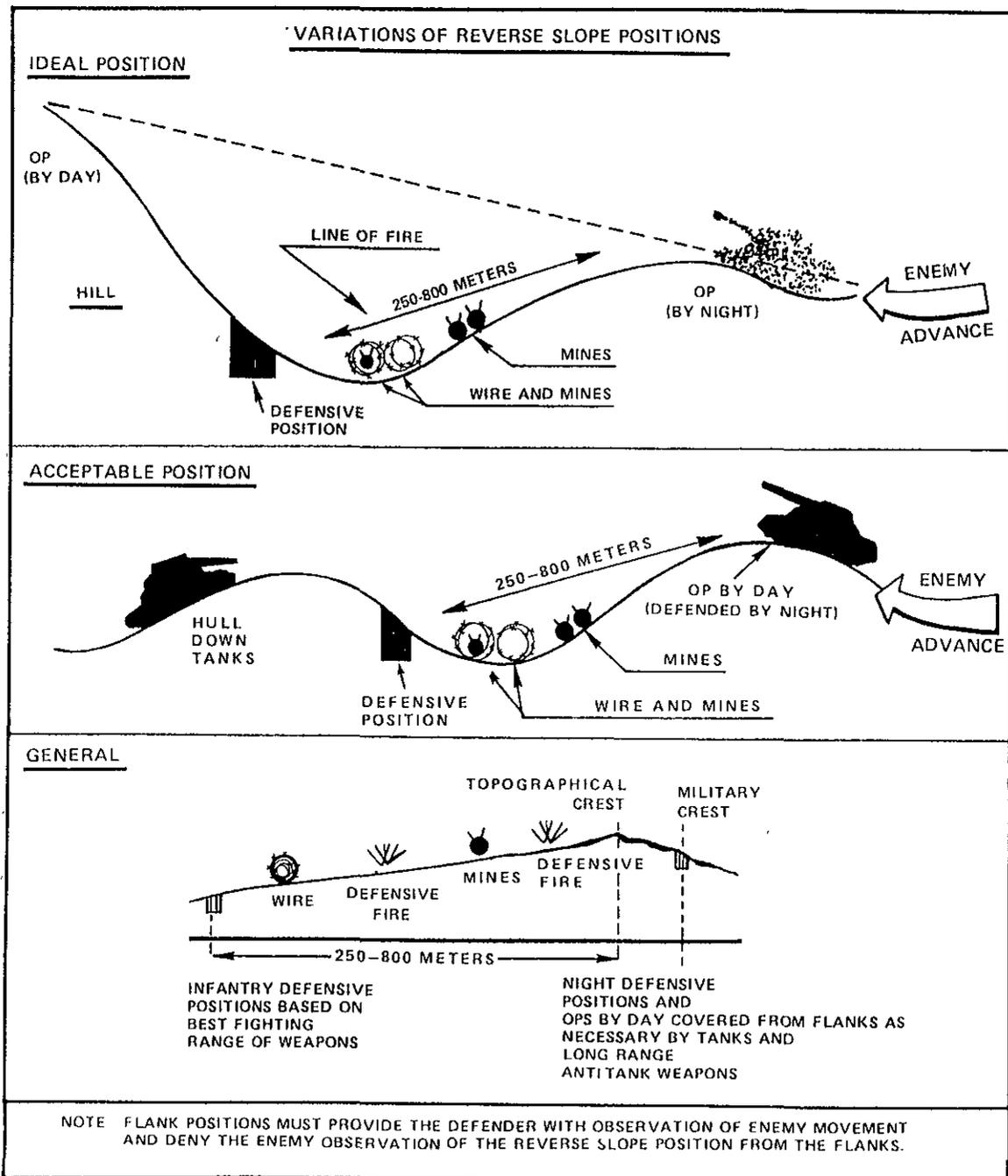
observation. As a rule of thumb, good observation should extend to the flanks and at least 500 to 600 meters in front of the crest. Such observation is necessary to give the local commander early warning of enemy movements and to enable him, without compromising his main position, to impede the enemy by hitting the latter with observed fire. Though the surrender of such ground in the face of a determined attack may not always prejudice the defense as a whole, ground that affords observation considered vital to the conduct of the defense will doubtless have to be held at all costs.

Commanders will have to be extremely vigilant, of course, in instances where reverse slope positions are visible at a distance or from a flank. They will also have to be conscious of the potential threat from the air and insist

upon the highest standard of camouflage and air defense drills. Deception, too, should be considered as a means of gaining surprise.

Obviously, the key to a reverse slope position is the domination of the topographical crest, if that crest cannot be dominated, the position ultimately will be rendered untenable. For this reason, some small arms fire should fall over the forward slope. And any foothold the enemy gains on the crest that limits observation should be thrown off by a counterattack.

By day, forward observation posts, supplemented by snipers and machineguns on the military crest, should be enough to prevent such lodgments; these should be well-concealed and sited so as not to need too much local protection. Consideration should also be given to deploying



long-range antiarmor weapons to the flanks in the vicinity of the crest, from which locations they could apply enfilade fire before falling back to alternate positions in depth.

All such daylight deployment, of course, would have to be reinforced at night by additional protective parties and standing patrols armed with automatic weapons and grenade launchers, and these should be prepared to hold ground against enemy reconnaissance and infiltration efforts. At rifle company level, the troops that are not deployed forward should be prepared to counterattack the enemy as soon as he gets near these localities. (The same tactics should be used during the day as well.) Vigorous night patrolling will also probably have to be carried out to the flanks and to the front to deny the enemy ground from which he could observe during the day.

FIRE PLAN

The fire plan for the defense of a reverse slope position must aim at converting the crest and the reverse slope itself into a killing zone for armored vehicles and personnel. The defensive position itself should be located at a distance from the crest line so that the troops in the position can bring the most fire to bear on the killing zone without coming under fire themselves from any enemy tanks that might have gained hull-down positions along the crest line. (Given the limited depression of Soviet tank guns, though, the greater threat would perhaps come from the fact that those tanks could call down accurate indirect fire or could correct the fire of other tanks firing from a flank.) A second obstacle that can be covered with effective fire should also be emplaced on the reverse slope. It will be a better obstacle if it is defiladed like the first and if it cannot be reconnoitered by day.

The antiarmor defense, organized in depth and covering the crest, should be based on a combination of minefield obstacles, hand-held and crew-served antiarmor weapons, and the fire of large caliber artillery pieces. The emphasis at all times should be on bringing fire to bear from concealed positions, for it is only the invisible weapon — the hidden antiarmor gun, in particular — that can really do the job properly. (Antiarmor guided missiles, of course, can destroy enemy tanks in hull-down positions that may have attained the crest.) Consideration should be given as well to flank protection, a task that, ideally, can be carried out either by tanks or by infantry fighting vehicles.

The advantages of a reverse slope position can be summarized as follows:

- As the enemy cannot see the defender, he cannot make a detailed plan; he has to attack blind. Because the defender remains defiladed to him, he cannot attack frontally by direct fire. And because he cannot observe the position, he is unlikely to be able to neutralize it with indirect fire from artillery and mortars. Hidden, as it is from view, the reverse slope position is protected even

from an enemy with surveillance equipment. In fact, such a position is likely to be seen from the ground only when (and if) the enemy has passed through.

- Movement by day is not so restricted, and the soldiers do not have to remain in their fighting positions all the time. As a result, their morale should be better and they should find it easier to maintain an acceptable standard of alertness. Too, work on positions can be continued during the day, which is particularly important after a night attack. In Europe, where fighting positions often become water-logged, such freedom of movement will also have a salutary effect on the health of the troops.

- A well-sited reverse slope position cannot be seen by enemy infantrymen or tank crews until they are within the effective range of the friendly forces' rifles and antiarmor weapons. Thus, the latter run no risk of disclosing their positions by opening fire too soon. This is a significant consideration because one important combat lesson learned in World War II was to "hold your fire until a kill is a certainty; a miss discloses your position." The defenders also gain the greatest amount of surprise — once an enemy force moves over the crest and down the reverse slope it cannot hide from the defenders, and any movement it may make forward or to the rear will mean its almost certain piecemeal destruction.

- Counterattacks can be rehearsed in relative security, and fire control measures can be more clearly and deliberately defined.

- Resistance that is organized at such points is likely to be discovered by the attacker only when he runs smack into it or beyond it on a flank.

The disadvantages of reverse slopes are generally these:

- Troops that occupy reverse slope positions cannot see what happens forward of the crest to their front.

- The siting of minefields or other obstacles on the forward slope becomes a major problem, because it may be difficult, even impossible, for the defenders to cover them by direct fire.

- Advance posts must be established forward to give early warning of an attack and to ensure that accurate indirect fires can be brought to bear on the obstacles and the approaches to the position. Such observation posts and standing patrols can be relieved only at night. As they will always be vulnerable to enemy daylight attacks, they must be well-concealed and must remain essentially motionless during the day.

- Some redeployment may be necessary at night, since the enemy cannot be allowed to occupy the crest under cover of darkness. An active patrol program must also be instituted.

- Enemy tanks could conceivably work themselves into hull-down positions on their side of the crest, from which locations they could correct the fires of their artillery pieces and their other tanks.

- The reverse slope position is vulnerable to flank attacks and to the air action of an enemy that has air superiority.

A defender should plan to beat off an enemy attack in-

initially with artillery and mortars, and then, progressively, with antiarmor weapons and machineguns. Forward observation officers and mortar fire controllers should always be capable of bringing down indirect fire on all major approaches and on the forward slope. Only when an enemy attack is pressed home to the assault stage should the bulk of the infantry be required. This stage may occur in spite of the best defensive plan.

Arrangements should be made beforehand, therefore, to withdraw any troops from the forward crest along pre-reconnoitered and designated routes. Consideration should also be given to mounting local counterattacks if they stand a chance to succeed.

Again, it is important that the reverse slope position itself should have been sited far enough back from the crest so that friendly artillery and mortar fires can be brought down on the crestline. And from the crest back toward the main defensive position, an avalanche of fire must greet and overwhelm any attacking enemy force. The best way to achieve this is to have an invisible defensive position from which the enemy can be subjected to unexpected fire from hidden weapons.

Obviously, an enemy attack during the day would be extremely hazardous to him if an open forward slope and its approaches were covered by fire and observation. Any such attack is thus more likely to be made at night, or under cover of smoke. Therefore, the crest of a reverse slope position should be occupied in sufficient strength by night to stop an enemy force from occupying it by stealth.

Early in World War II it was suggested that "battle positions" should be prepared on the forward slope, keeping troops during the day in "rest" positions on the reverse slope. After trial and experience, however, British Commonwealth armies found this method unsatisfactory, because the troops often found it difficult to move forward to their battle positions under heavy fire. These armies also discovered that soldiers fought better from fighting positions into which they had settled down. The extra time required to distribute ammunition and other administrative supplies properly proved a further problem. Eventually, these discoveries led to the very practical realization that there was really neither enough time nor enough field stores to outfit two positions.

Attacking reverse slope positions and consolidating in relation to them is a more difficult task. It is a truism that with proper support any given position can be taken — the difficulty is always holding it. If possible, an attack should be launched astride a ridge or around another feature rather than directly over the crest. Whatever plan is adopted, fire controllers must be well forward, and troops cannot be permitted to stop on the crest. As a counterattack can usually be expected, too, friendly troops on an exposed slope must get off it and dig in immediately; it is simply impossible to consolidate under close enemy observation. The alternatives are to deny the enemy close direct observation by going forward to the crest of the next feature, establishing fighting patrols there, and consolidating on the reverse slope, or to deny

him observation by clearing him off his reverse slope and then going back onto one's own reverse slope maintaining dominance of the crest.

It is impossible to say which is the most likely course. The exception to these alternatives would be when well-developed enemy reverse slope positions are captured. Though these will now be on the forward slope of a friendly force, it is probably better to occupy them, because they will provide adequate shelter from mortar fire. Even then, positions should be dug on the reverse slope by reserve platoons or companies so that the forward troops can eventually be thinned out into them. Only one thing can be considered definitely wrong when attacking a reverse slope position — to remain on an exposed slope where consolidation is hopeless.

A well-developed reverse slope position can achieve the surprise needed to inflict heavy casualties on an enemy force, and it appears well-suited to IFV deployments. Resistance that is organized properly is likely to be discovered by an attacker only when he runs into it. Considering the Soviet predilection for artillery and tanks, the reverse slope position may offer a reasonable, practical means of tactically negating the effects of Soviet direct and indirect fire weapons. The low silhouette of Soviet tanks further militates against their taking up effective hull-down positions along ridge lines; in short, a Soviet force may have to use essentially infantry attacks.

All of these other advantages really devolve, in fact, from concealment, both from fire and from view. Concealment is, in fact, the be all and end all of reverse slope positions. Naturally, much can be said for using a reverse slope when the alternative is to occupy a forward slope position that does not offer adequate natural cover. This is particularly true in open country where reverse slope positions may generally prove the most suitable solution. Good reverse slope positions are not that common, however, and flank protection remains their universal weakness.

It is normally possible in close country, of course, to attain concealment without having to locate behind a hill. Accordingly, the hard and fast rule of "always" or "never" cannot be applied to the selection of reverse slope positions — logic will always dictate that, as the object of reverse slope defense is concealment, it is wrong to say a reverse slope position should always be adopted. When developing such a position is indicated, though, it can work quite well, as it has so often in the past.



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