NTC: WINNING IN THE ENGAGEMENT AREA

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All too often at the NTC, a task force's countermobility plan is not integrated into the scheme of maneuver, the intent of the obstacles is not briefed, and the survivability plan is weak. Company or team commanders and engineers merely do a map reconnaissance instead of siting the obstacles on the ground. The unit's survivability plan is not executed, few of the tanks and improved TOW vehicles are dug in, and friendly vehicles are killed by friendly mines. Although the obstacles may delay the opposing force (OPFOR) they are easy to breach because they have not been covered by fire. And they could not be covered by fire because they had not been properly sited.

Destroying an attacking OPFOR regiment is tough. The challenge begins with the attacker's numerical advantage, which is at least three to one. Then the desert conditions and the OPFOR's home team knowledge of the ground often allow it to uncover the defense.

The OPFOR soldiers can see for great distances, and they know where to go to establish outposts. Wide avenues of approach into the task force sector make mutual support difficult. And the width of the sector itself is often more than a task force can cover adequately. With the opposing force leaders' knowledge of the defense and the wide avenues, their favorite tactic is to mass the entire regiment against one defending company, thus gaining far more than a three-to-one advantage. As in combat, the OPFOR's massed fires are deadly and fast. If the defending force does not have some physical obstacles to slow the OPFOR, it will have little time to shoot accurately into the horde before being overrun or bypassed. It will have even less time to reposition its forces.

Although defensive principles are simple, their application can be difficult. Understanding these principles is not enough—they must be practiced, and practiced, and practiced.

Winning the fight in the engagement area requires integrating the close combat trio—maneuver, fire, and terrain—to get every advantage the defender can squeeze out of his personnel and equipment. This means that a task force must do three things—use obstacles properly, prepare its battle position well, and effectively deceive the attacker when he tries to uncover the defense.

Obstacles are the most important weapons in the defender's arsenal for disrupting and disorganizing the attacker's scheme of maneuver. The single most important consideration in planning obstacles is the effect they are supposed to have on the attacker's formation—or the way they complement the defender's scheme of maneuver. Determining this is critical, because it dictates all the other details such as covering the obstacles with fire and tying them into the terrain.

A defender's obstacle concept should begin with the specific effect he wants the obstacles to have on the enemy. The task force commander must visualize the way the OPFOR will enter and cross the engagement area. Then he must plan the obstacles themselves so that they will interact with the OPFOR formation to produce the desired results.

Within and adjacent to the engagement area, obstacles are generally designed to turn, fix, or block the OPFOR formation.

- *Turning* obstacles deflect a formation in the desired direction.
- *Fixing* obstacles slow and disorganize an attacking formation within the engagement area to give the defender more time to place fires on him and break up his battle drills.
- *Blocking* obstacles make it difficult for an attacking formation to get out of the engagement area or to overrun a battle position.

The defending commander can use a simple sketch technique to show his task force engineer what he would like to do to the enemy formation—turn, fix, or block it. The engineer can then design an obstacle system to achieve that goal. He should not try to cover too wide an engagement area, because the OPFOR loves to find an isolated company position and run an entire regiment across it.

The engineer can certainly use obstacles to control where the attacker goes, for he will bypass rather than breach any obstacle that will slow him too much—particularly if it is covered with fire. If the OPFOR does elect to breach it, the delay will give the defending forces time to be repositioned to handle him.

The commander should mass both direct and indirect fires on an obstacle, or it will not remain an obstacle for long. (Two or three vehicles firing at the OPFOR do not constitute massed direct fires.) He should also plan artillery fires ahead of the obstacles so that a mounted attacker will be buttoned up when he strikes the obstacle; on likely covered positions where the OPFOR might halt if he decides to breach the obstacle; and at targets directly on the obstacle to prevent dismounted breaching attempts.

Outposts should be put out in front of the obstacle system, and aggressive patrols should be used to keep the OPFOR from reconnoitering or pre-breaching the obstacles.

The use of obstacles and the ground around the engagement area must also be coordinated so that the fires from the battle positions can be directed against the flanks and the rear of the attacking OPFOR formations. This not only makes the fires more effective but also makes it more difficult for the OPFOR to acquire targets.

Before obstacles are installed, they should be sited from the overwatching positions, and then the responsible maneuver commander and his engineer should jointly position them on the ground. This is critical because slight changes in an obstacle position can either enable the soldiers in a battle position to cover it thoroughly or prevent them from seeing it at all. A good technique is to drive a vehicle along the proposed obstacle trace while siting it to make sure enough firing positions can see the obstacle and cover it adequately.

After determining the obstacle trace, the engineers should stake it out on the ground so that the planned obstacles can be constructed exactly along the trace. After the engineers install the obstacles, either they or soldiers from the defending maneuver unit should drive a vehicle along the trace again so that the soldiers manning the direct fire weapons in the battle position can record them on their range cards. (If all personnel know precisely where a minefield is, this may also help prevent friendly vehicles from wandering into it.)

The next step is to coordinate with the engineer in preparing survivability positions for the direct fire systems. These positions will add tremendously to their ability to fight and survive—an old manual claimed that a vehicle's probability of being hit dropped from 94 percent to 15 percent when it was dug in. Whether these figures are precise or not, a target's survivability does increase markedly as its exposure decreases.

To give every direct fire system a primary and an alternate position, a typical task force training at the NTC needs an average of 110 positions. But the average number actually dug is 22, or one-fifth that number.

Correcting this deficiency takes rapid planning on the part of the engineer leader and good engineer blade teams. It also takes rigorous discipline to limit each company to the number of positions or the amount of digging time the plan allocates. This is a leadership task that must command the attention of the maneuver commander and the engineer alike.

The actual construction of a company's fighting position should begin only after its fire plan has been approved. If the position is to be built before the company arrives, the company should send a representative to select each individual fighting position. He should be careful to select these positions from ground level to make sure they have adequate fields of fire. A good technique is to mark the position with a U-shaped picket oriented in the proper direction. The key is then to use the selected position and never to redig one, regardless of better ideas that may come along later.

Commanders must make sure the engineers provide supervision along with their digging equipment. If the engineer

equipment cannot prepare positions to standard, if it sits idle when there is work to be done, or if it runs out of fuel, then the supervision is inadequate. A strong engineer leader, either an officer or an NCO, should be in overall charge.

The initial vehicle locations in the battle position should be fighting positions that take advantage of the terrain to provide both defilade protection and covered withdrawal routes. If the initial location is eventually approved as the final position, the hole can be dug faster since it is usually cut into a reverse slope and less dirt has to be moved.

TWO POSITIONS

Each combat vehicle should have two prepared positions (primary and alternate) on each battle position. At roughly one hour per position (the average rate for the OPFOR at the NTC), digging in an entire task force should take eight D7 class dozers one day (or four D7 dozers two days). The effective use of reverse slopes can significantly reduce both the time and the amount of digging.

(We might do well to adopt the Soviets' aggressive doctrine about digging in combat vehicles: Although much better equipped for digging than the U.S. Army, they do not wait for that equipment; the crews begin digging in their own vehicles with handtools while waiting for the engineers to get to them.)

The defender's plan for the obstacle system and for the survivability of the battle position should include all of the obvious counter-reconnaissance steps—eliminating or neutralizing the OPFOR's observation posts before beginning construction and his scouts and patrols when they arrive. In spite of these measures, though, it is still very difficult to keep the OPFOR from uncovering a task force's defense in the desert. A better way is to use deception to prevent him from seeing the true picture.

Various deceptive techniques can be used. For example, engineer work produces a large signature. Digging, in particular, can cause a column of dust to rise hundreds of feet into the air. A commander can use this to advantage by putting some engineers to work in likely places as a deception effort to support his plan. This can be done while the actual positions and exact obstacle sites are being completed.

Deceptive obstacle systems can be used, leading, for example, with a real obstacle, followed by obvious but fake obstacles with aggressive patrols to guard them. Phony battle positions can be used, too—a few scratches on a hilltop with a couple of real tanks to fire at the OPFOR reconnaissance elements can paint a picture for him.

In addition, when the OPFOR's reconnaissance or lead elements appear, they should not be engaged from the actual battle positions but from the outposts, or even better, from the deceptive battle positions.

To win in the engagement area, the defender must dominate the attacker's maneuver and defeat the attacker's fires. He does this by planning and executing an obstacle system that, when integrated with his own maneuver plans and fires, prevents the attacker from successfully executing his own scheme of maneuver. This effort is improved when fighting vehicles effectively use the ground for protection from OPFOR fires.

While the NTC does not provide actual combat experience, it is an ideal training ground on which the high-intensity, high-speed battlefield of the future can be approximated. And on that training ground, it has been established beyond the shadow of a doubt that if natural and manmade obstacles are not covered by direct fire from armored vehicles, and if weapon systems are not then efficiently positioned and properly dug in, a battalion task force will be destroyed.

It is up to the task force commander and the engineer, planning and working together, to prevent this destruction. With a combined effort of well-integrated obstacles and effective direct fires, a task force can succeed against the opposing force at the NTC—and in combat.

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