

outgoing commander, prepare an after action review on the joint inventory and brief the battalion commander on the results.

Using this three-step method, you will be able to conduct a good joint change of command inventory and assure 100

percent property accountability. When the inventory is completed, you will know what property your unit has, where it is, and who is signed for it. Then, as you receive the unit's guidon, you will be confident that your first mission as a commander has been successful.

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**Captain Charles J. McKeever**, an Armor officer, has been a tank and scout platoon leader in the 4th Infantry Division and headquarters troop commander in the 3d Battalion, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, in Germany. He is now assigned to the U.S. Army Foreign Science and Technology Center in Virginia.

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# Drewry's Bluff

## A Blocking Position

CAPTAIN KEVIN J. DOUGHERTY

A blocking position (according to Field Manual 101-5-1, Operational Terms and Symbols) is "a defensive position so sited as to deny the enemy access to a given area or to prevent his advance in a given direction."

The mere denial of an enemy avenue of approach is not an end in itself, though; a unit will usually be instructed to establish a blocking position as part of a larger operation. For example, a reserve unit may be ordered to establish a blocking position to secure a flank or rear until the situation develops and the unit is committed to the attack. Likewise, a fixing element may be tasked to establish a blocking position to allow a maneuver element to envelop the temporarily halted enemy.

Because Soviet offensive doctrine is characterized by a high rate of advance to develop penetrations leading to the enemy's rear, all units must be prepared to establish effective blocking positions.

The success of a blocking position depends upon three key factors: a detailed analysis of the terrain and enemy intentions to determine likely avenues of approach; the careful use of natural and manmade obstacles to channel the enemy into the engagement area and prevent a bypass; and the accurate emplacement of

key weapons to bring the greatest possible firepower to bear on the enemy while still affording the best protection for friendly forces. If these prerequisites are met, a blocking position does not require lengthy preparations or a large force.

A good historical example of a blocking position, particularly one that did not have the benefit of extensive time to prepare and a lot of resources, is the one at Drewry's Bluff during the Civil War.

### RIVERBEND

Drewry's Bluff, sometimes called Fort Darling, was a small earthen fort that Chesterfield County, Virginia, farmers had begun constructing in 1861. Lightly defended and only partly finished, it stood less than eight miles south of Richmond, Virginia, on the James River. Fortunately, at this point the river bent sharply to the east for a short distance and then turned again to the south.

The work on the fort had been haphazard, but in May 1862 the unchecked Union advance gave the workers a new sense of urgency. In fact, the fort was the last line of defense protecting the Con-

federate capital from a flotilla of Union gunboats.

The likely enemy avenue of advance was the James River, which ran between Hampton Roads and the Union objective of Richmond. Union commander General George McClellan had shipped his 150,000 troops from Alexandria to Fort Monroe and had then begun a methodical advance toward Richmond in his long-awaited Peninsula campaign. His plan was to send the Union Navy to open up a river route to Richmond as other naval forces had earlier opened such a route to New Orleans. The Confederate commander, General Joseph Johnston, had withdrawn every step of the way until his troops were backed against Richmond and there was simply nowhere else to go.

The first step for the Confederates to take at Drewry's Bluff in May 1862 was to improve the natural obstacle created by the bend in the river. They sank several stone-laden hulks and drove piles at critical points to narrow the channel. Now, any Union gunboats making the turn would have to expose their flanks to the fort. The river banks themselves prevented a bypass.

The Confederates then placed guns from the scuttled ironclad *Virginia* and other weapons 100 feet above water



Fort Darling at Drewry's Bluff, looking down the James River.

level, knowing that the Union gunboats would not be able to elevate their guns high enough to hit them. Consequently, on 15 May, a Union force of five vessels, including the ironclads *Monitor* and *Galena*, proved no match for the defenders. The *Galena* alone was hit 43 times.

The Confederate success at Drewry's Bluff checked the Union advance only temporarily, but for the time being at least, Richmond and the Confederacy were saved.

As at Drewry's Bluff, a blocking position can be used wherever the enemy can

be isolated on a single avenue. The defenders must use a combination of natural and manmade obstacles to channel the enemy into an engagement area and prevent him from bypassing it. They must also carefully place their weapons so they will destroy the enemy while protecting the friendly forces.

A blocking position has quite specific applications to urban areas, where the enemy avenue of advance is not a river but a high-speed road. The natural obstacles are not sunken hulks but car cribs and minefields. The weapons are placed not on a bluff but in key buildings adja-

cent to the road. And once a blocking position fixes the enemy, a maneuver unit can flank and destroy him.

Whether along a river, in a city, or even in a narrow mountain pass, a blocking position has useful applications and should be carefully considered.

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**Captain Kevin J. Dougherty** is assigned to the 5th Battalion, 502d Infantry, Berlin Brigade, where he has been S-3 Air and a company commander. He previously served as a rifle platoon leader, company executive officer, and scout platoon leader in the 1st Battalion, 502d Infantry, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault). He is a 1983 graduate of the United States Military Academy.

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