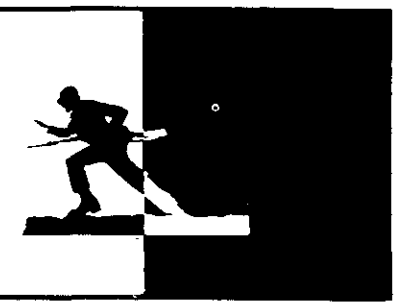
PAST TIMES



EDITOR'S NOTE: In the November-December 1990 issue of INFANTRY (pages 28-31), we reprinted "The Middle East: A Traveler's Guide," by Charles L. Black, from our November-December 1970 issue (pages 8-11). A companion article that also appeared in that earlier issue (pages 6-7) is reprinted below. Both articles outline some unique problems that combat leaders—as well as commanders of combat support and combat service support units—are likely to encounter in the desert.

S.L.A. Marshall, a well-known author and syndicated columnist, observed at first-hand the Sinai War of 1956, the Lebanon crisis of 1958, and the Six-Day War in the Middle East in 1967.

THE DESERT: It's Different

S.L.A. MARSHALL

The late Justice Holmes is credited with the classic remark that no generalization is worth a damn, including this one. Because no two deserts are alike, one had best heed that warning when writing about the special problems of desert warfare.

The Namib in Southwest Africa and the true Sahara are clearly impassable for armies. Their unbroken and massive seas of dunes make them so.

Much of the surface of the Sinai is blocked to military columns by the same kind of barrier, no less imposing. Back a jeep a few meters off the road and it is stuck. But the Sinai is not the whole Middle East and there is desert country directly east of the Jordan River where motor vehicles can wheel about almost as freely as on the Bonneville Flats.

What is invariable, however, in fighting operations across desert country, is that the water supply must finally dominate movement and the side that is least roadbound has the decisive advantage, all else being equal. In desert campaigning, the distance between wells and oases has a strangulating hold on tactics.

Being barren, the desert cannot be conquered by armies. Of itself, as Winston Churchill once wrote, the desert yields nothing to them but hardship and suffocation. To occupy it is therefore purposeless and wasteful, unless occupation is an essential step toward ultimate security.

It is this very singleness of purpose about desert warfare that makes it unique. The arena is suitable for nothing except primordial combat, with death or survival as the issue. All movement is limited or regulated by the availability of water, and all maneuver seeks the destruction of the enemy force.

A column may be stopped by fuel exhaustion and suffer no real hurt. Beached and waterless, however, its people are as vulnerable as the 40,000 Persians who, in 500 B.C., marched from Kharga to destroy Siwa and were themselves destroyed to the last man by heat and thirst.

The fighting tank was so named because when first developed, it was disguised as a water tank for service on the Middle East desert. While the point is almost allegorical, 55 years later there is still no replacement for either in desert fighting operations. Both fighting tank and water tanker must be up front, with water in plentiful supply. Then there is no need for a salt therapy. The Israelis, who don't use salt tablets, didn't lose a man from heat exhaustion in the 1967 Sinai campaign.

All infantry should be mechanized, rather than motorized. Unless artillery is self-propelled like mechanized infantry, it stays roadbound, unsuited to flanking movements, incapable of supporting surprise attack, and so it becomes a drag on the armor.

Foot infantry's place is in the halftrack, or armored personnel carrier (APC). It may be good for a march of five or six miles during a nighttime approach over ground forbidden even to tracked vehicles. But more than that by night, and even half as much by day, may drain it of all fighting power.

Night operations are a boon to troops who know the terrain like the palm of their hand and a reckless risk for those who don't. In this respect, desert operations differ not a bit from others. There is no easier way to scramble a force than to deploy it at night on jumbled, unfamiliar ground. Voice recognition is about five percent efficient in the dark. Too quickly, men drift away, units become mixed and all control is lost.

Man needs rest and sleep. Just try and get it under a baking sun. Night operations are justified mainly when the blitz is on, the enemy is clearly off balance, and the advantage to be won clearly requires a continuing momentum.

In their book *Alternative to Armageddon*, General I.D. White and Colonel Wesley W. Yale see a prime model for desert operations in the 1967 sweep to Suez by the armored army under Israeli General Yeshuyahu Gavish. Strike with all power, get the objective won as swiftly as possible, and thereby keep casualties down. That, they say, is the lesson.

Like another brilliant model, Cannae, however, the Six-Day War did not settle the dust. It was a forced-draft plan throughout, demanding more of men and the gods of chance than is likely to be gained again. The Israelis went the limit of risk, believing that they had to beat Egypt in four days or see the United Nations intervene.

DEMANDING

Still, the all-out attack from base to base has no alternative in desert warfare, since the enemy is bestride the waterhole. Not for that reason alone, but because I feel it a principle that has been proved sound time and again by the boldest commanders in our time—for example, Patton and Rommel—I hold with the Israeli idea that the logistical tail must not be allowed to snag or to wag the combat dog.

Take the chance and keep fighting movement free! Each combat column should move out with enough basic supply for men and machines to see it through the day. Resupply can come along by helicopter or the road under cover of dark. Whether we can adjust or liberate our staff thinking to loft such an ideal and hold with it should be less of a question today than formerly. In Vietnam operations, we have taken equivalent risks repeatedly.

The airborne attack and airmobile deployment of patrols, strike forces, and reinforcements are highly suited to fighting in the desert. Good drop zones and landing zones, though not ubiquitous, are more common than in country that seems more hospitable, or for that matter, in jungle-clad hills. Any dune promises a featherbed landing, and in Sinai there are far more dunes than wadis. Forest and swamps, the bane of paratroopers during the fighting in Western Europe, are not to be found.

It may be asked: How about the threat to the vertical attack that comes of sophisticated antiair weapons, such as have already appeared along the Suez? The threat is indubitable. Our losses of aircraft and the men aboard due to ground fire have been grievous even in Vietnam, where sophisticated is a less-used word.

Similar questions probably have been raised with the appearance of every new weapon since before the first appearance of Greek fire. There is only one answer in logic: The enemy with his weapon cannot be everywhere, and as Willie Keeler said about wielding a ball bat, the secret of success is to hit 'em where they ain't. Having laid down this policy guideline, I call on intelligence to provide the implementing detail.

Over my lifetime, I would say that we have made too much of the commanding importance of high ground in our schooling of officers, and is has cost us dearly many times. Experience in Vietnam may have conditioned a larger number to understand that there are other values, sometimes more prizeworthy.

High ground in desert fighting is the prime consideration when it constricts a pass, commands a crossroads at a workable range, flanks a main highway over sufficient distance to keep a column in prolonged enfilade or, when fortified, protects the approaches to a port, main city or watering place.

Otherwise, leave it to the birds, meaning the ravens and vultures. Where there can be no sustained linear fighting because the object itself is unrelated to the outcome of the campaign, high ground is another mirage.

We haven't looked at desert operations for the last quarter century. It could be about time. There's much to learn, and when we last stopped, we had hardly begun.