

# North Korean Infantry Battalions Tactics

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*EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the second article in a two-part series on the organization, equipment, weapons, and tactics of North Korean infantry battalions. The first part, which appeared in INFANTRY's September-October 1992 issue, covered organization and equipment.*

The doctrine of the North Korean Peoples Army (NKPA) combines the conventional military art used by the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China with commando and unconventional warfare. While conventional forces make a Blitzkrieg attack on the front and flanks, special commando troops infiltrate and disrupt the rear area to provide combat in depth and to expand the combat zone. Battles are conducted on two fronts—one made up of a conventional force engaging the enemy along the forward line of troops and a second with a specially trained force operating in the enemy rear.

The NKPA's infantry operations are generally dismounted, but the infantry battalions are reinforced with tanks and extensive artillery support—usually a tank company or platoon, a 120mm mortar company, a 76.2mm field gun battery, one or two engineer platoons, flamethrowers, and a chemical and radioactive reconnaissance and scout unit.

The primary offensive maneuvers are the penetration, envelopment, by-pass, and pursuit. In the offense, the NKPA seeks force ratios between 4:1 and 6:1.

The North Koreans use two types of infiltration techniques—*pocho* and

*Cheon Ib*. In the *pocho* technique, teams of squad size or smaller infiltrate through gaps in the enemy's defense and sabotage targets in the enemy's rear. In the *Cheon Ib* technique, small elements of the supporting attack force create small gaps in the enemy's defenses to assist the main attack units as they try to penetrate or envelop the enemy defense.

Penetration operations are conducted when there are no exposed flanks to

exploit (Figure 1). Successful penetrations require surprise and strong firepower. Penetration operations would be required, for example, to get through the South Korean defensive positions near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Under the cover of artillery, the infantry battalions assault the enemy's front line, with the attached tanks in front of the infantry. Tanks and artillery target the enemy, and engineers breach the obstacles. The immediate objective is

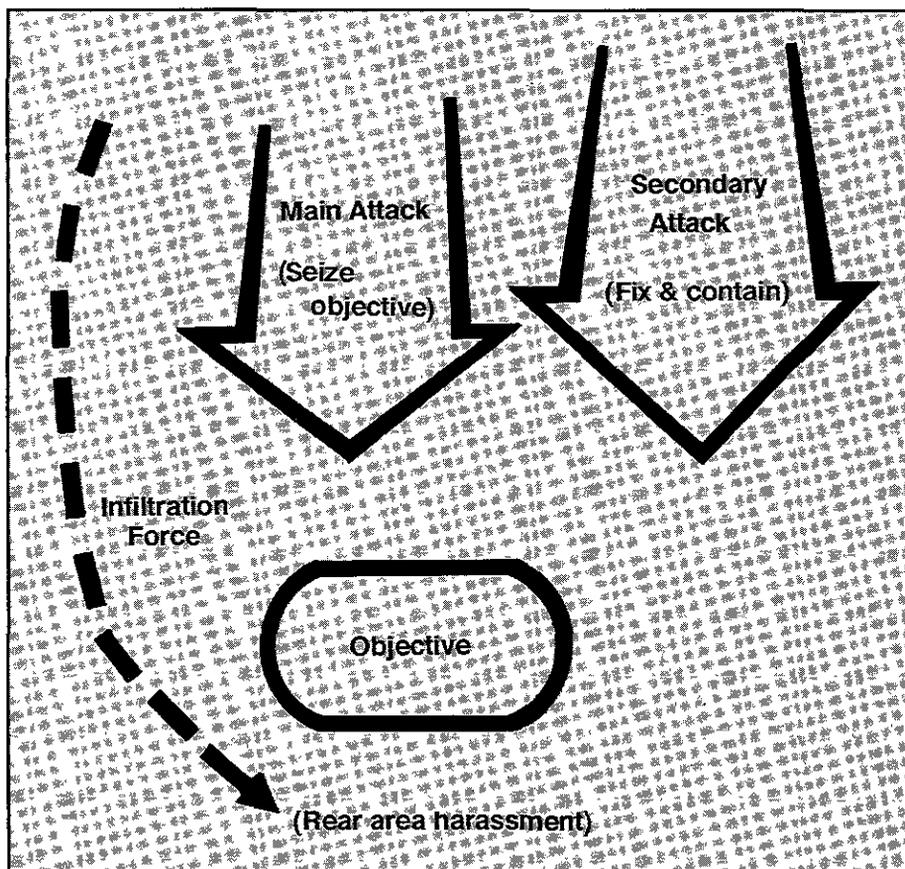


Figure 1. Penetration

to capture or destroy the enemy's lead company, and the subsequent objective is to destroy the enemy battalion's reserve.

The North Koreans consider the envelopment (Figure 2) the most successful offensive maneuver. The single envelopment uses a portion of the attacking force to pin the enemy against an obstacle or to fix him in place while a main attack force strikes deep in the enemy rear area. In a double envelopment, infantry or mechanized infantry units attack to fix the enemy, and armor or mechanized infantry units maneuver around the flanks of the enemy and use two main attacks against the enemy rear. An infantry battalion may attack across a front 700 to 2,000 meters wide. Frontages and depths, however, would be compressed against well-prepared enemy positions. An infantry battalion, for example, would be used to envelop an enemy company.

The bypass, a form of envelopment, is used to force the enemy to abandon or change his main positions (Figure 3). The main attacking force avoids contact with enemy strength, moves to surround the enemy, cuts off his escape routes, and forces him to abandon his prepared defensive positions.

The NKPA uses three types of pursuit—*frontal*, *parallel*, and *composite* (Figure 4). Motorized or mechanized infantry units often conduct parallel pursuits, using speed to cut the enemy's withdrawal routes and envelop his retreating forces.

During the offense, the infantry battalion is used as part of an infantry regiment's first or second echelon. The infantry battalion is the primary attack unit, and the attack positions are 800 to 1,000 meters from the enemy's defensive line. The infantry battalion normally attacks on a front of 1,000 to 1,500 meters, but the front could be as narrow as 600 meters, depending on the terrain. The depth of the attack is usually three kilometers.

Two infantry companies (the first echelon) are usually on line, each with a frontage of 500 to 700 meters. The second-echelon infantry company follows 400 to 1,000 meters behind and is com-

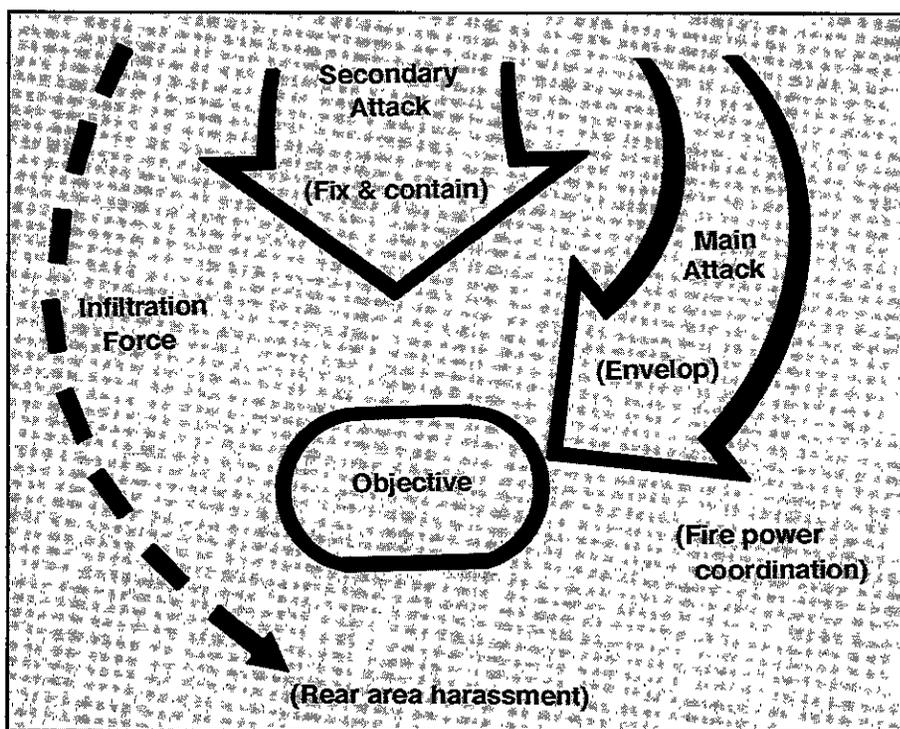


Figure 2. Envelopment

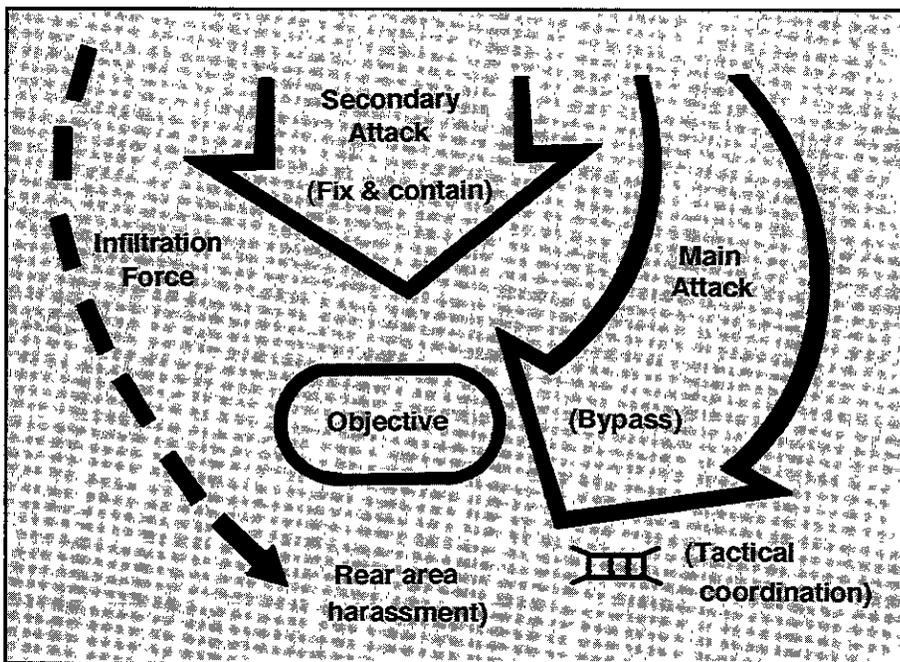


Figure 3. Bypass

mitted on order. However, the battalion may attack with one infantry company forward and two back, with the companies in echelon, or with all three on line. The battalion keeps a reinforced infantry platoon as the reserve. The 82mm mortars support the maneuver behind the lead company. The battalion's immediate objective is to pene-

trate initial enemy company positions and to annihilate mortar and antitank positions. Its subsequent objective is to destroy the enemy battalion's reserves.

Mechanized infantry units are normally employed in the breakthrough phase and the exploitation and pursuit phase. Mechanized infantry units fight as part of a combined arms team reinforced with tanks and artillery. The

tanks lead and the infantry armored vehicles follow 100 to 200 meters behind. Infantrymen normally remain mounted when passing through an NBC-contaminated area or an open area, when the enemy's antitank strength is light, or when making a breakthrough of a lightly armed enemy defensive position. Infantrymen normally dismount when faced with a strong antitank defense or a strongpoint defense, when passing through an obstacle field or a mine field, when attacking rugged terrain, or when maximum firepower is required to suppress the objective. Once dismounted, the infantrymen follow 50 meters behind the tanks and, after the assault, remount their vehicles.

Special operations forces have three primary roles in assisting the breakthrough: reconnaissance, sniper team actions, and larger unit assaults. Light infantry battalions conduct the assaults, using the same tactics as the standard infantry units of like size. Light infantry missions include supporting the ground forces, supporting the completion of an encirclement, and surprising and harassing the enemy in the rear area. Light infantry units, because of their lightweight equipment, are ideally suited for mountain and night operations.

## DEFENSE

NKPA defensive tactics consist of area defense and area mobile defense. In the area defense, the army holds its ground unless relieved; in the mobile defense, the forces (usually mechanized infantry or tank units) trade space for time. The main defensive zone is made up of battalion strongpoints. Within these defenses, an infantry battalion occupies two sets of positions at the same time. Most of the forces are in the forward positions with the reserve in the secondary position and ambush teams with antitank weapons between the positions.

Standard infantry battalions can be used in the security zone or the main defense zone. The security zone is

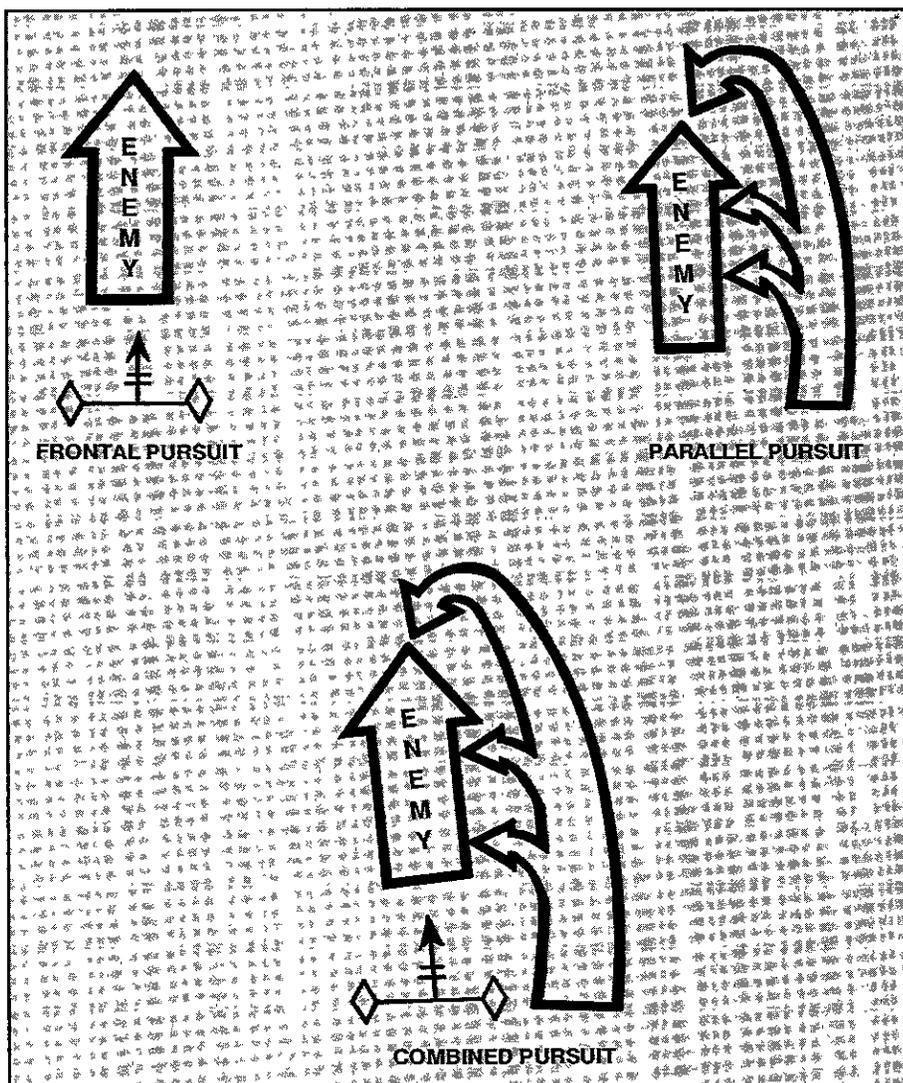


Figure 4. Types of Pursuit

divided into a general security zone 10 to 15 kilometers in front of the defense line and a combat security zone one to two kilometers in front of the defense line.

The battalion stronghold (Figure 5) is used as the basis of the main defense zone. The frontage and the depth of the battalion defense depend upon the factors of METT-T (mission, enemy, terrain, troops, and time). The company stronghold, usually part of the battalion stronghold, is located on a high point from which roads and approach routes can be covered with the available firepower. The company defensive position must be held.

The counterattack (Figure 6) is the basis of NKPA defensive combat. After taking positive steps to establish the best possible defense plan, units

rehearse their counterattack plan. North Korean doctrine states that the best time to counterattack is before the enemy unit can establish a defensive position. Counterattacks are directed against the enemy's flank or rear. In mountainous areas, the counterattack is usually conducted from higher ground to lower.

Antitank defenses are phased in three lines (Figure 7). The first line, in the combat security zone, is reinforced with antitank weapons and obstacles. The second line is a fixed barrier line where all firepower is coordinated. The third line is selected for important areas in the regiment's defense zone; it is on tank avenues of approach and is reinforced with antitank weapons, obstacles, and mobile antitank reserves.

Reconnaissance is one of the basic SOF missions, and reconnaissance units

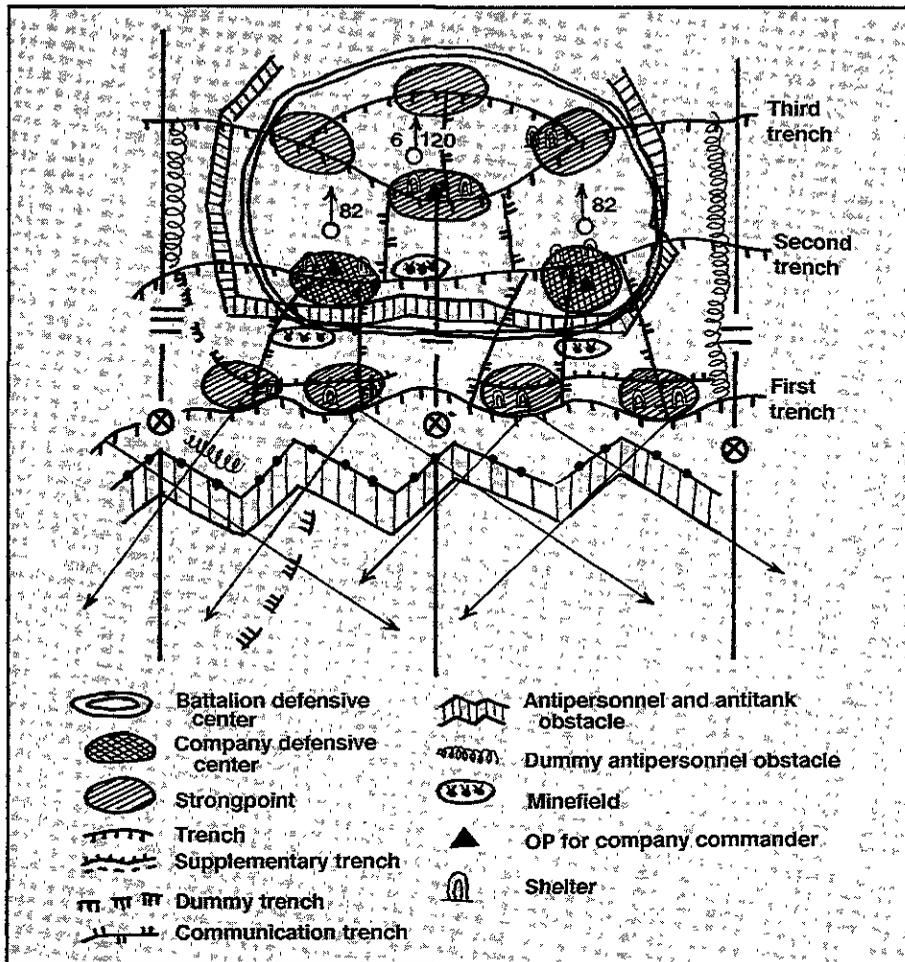


Figure 5. Battalion Stronghold

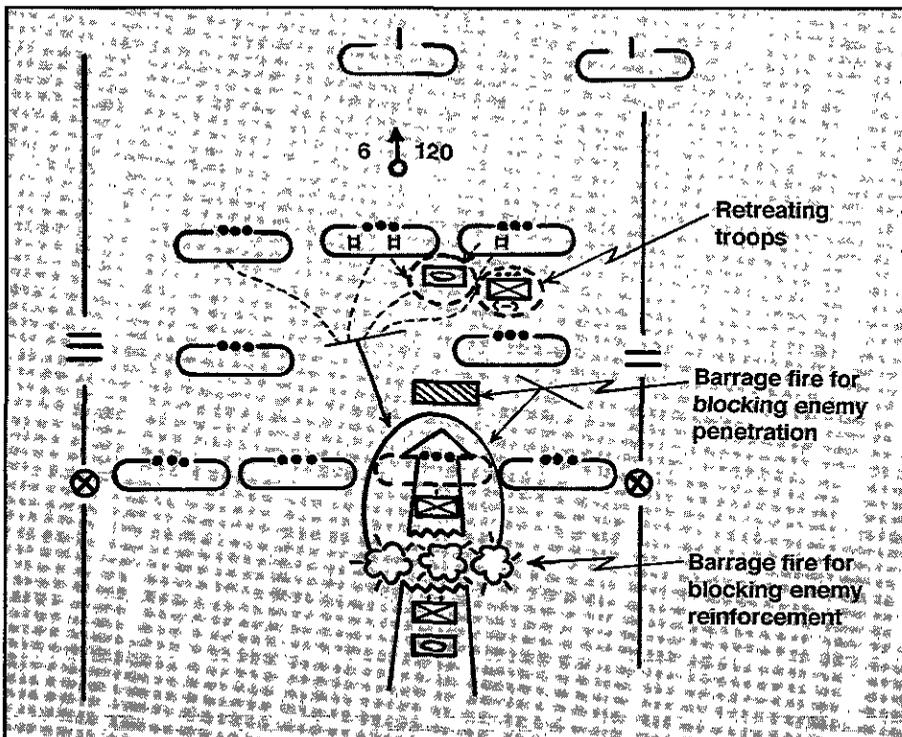


Figure 6. Counterattack Plan

are manned by light infantrymen. Small elements from the division's light infantry battalion perform reconnaissance missions in the enemy division's rear area. These missions are similar to those performed by light infantry brigades, sniper, and reconnaissance units in the enemy corps and echelons above corps rear areas.

NKPA reconnaissance operations include surveillance patrols, observation posts, listening posts, search and reconnaissance, raids, and ambushes. Each unit has personnel who are trained for surveillance and patrolling.

At the infantry battalion level, a surveillance patrol is usually composed of four to twelve men who may occupy one or two surveillance positions. The infantry battalion's advance guard moves two to three kilometers in front of the unit.

In urban terrain, the basic tactical element in the attack is a reinforced infantry battalion, which forms three to six raid teams and one security team. The raid teams have specific targets. Tanks and self-propelled guns usually advance with the infantry.

During defensive urban operations, an infantry battalion defends the approach routes to the city. Each of the other infantry battalions normally defends a street, with an infantry company defending a building. Most of the troops and weapons are located in cellars or on the bottom floors of buildings, but some of the unit's machine-guns and mortars are set up on the rooftops. Snipers and security personnel position themselves on upper floors to prevent enemy infiltration.

Mountain operations, because of the nature of the Korean peninsula, are the norm instead of the exception. The basic goals of a mountain offensive are to go around the enemy's flank, to penetrate the enemy's rear area, and to attack with all resources. Usually, the main attack is directed along a road or corridor terrain toward the objective and high points along the way that will assist command and control.

The infantry company in mountain operations is used as the base unit, with attachments of artillery, engineers, and

chemical personnel, as needed. Battalion commanders prepare for the offense by carrying out thorough reconnaissance, preparing to outflank the enemy, being ready for ambushes, and stocking the necessary supplies. The attack frontage for an infantry battalion is 1,000 to 3,000 meters; the frontage for an infantry company is 500 to 1,000 meters. Mortars, because of their high trajectory, are especially effective in mountain operations.

Infantry battalion defensive strongpoints are located on hilltops with connecting ridgelines and are linked to the company and platoon strongpoints. The fire support plan coordinates indirect and direct fire for all-around coverage. Fires and obstacles are placed to prevent the enemy from bypassing the position. Reserves are positioned along the anticipated enemy main attack.

During night operations, NKPA tactics are basically patterned after those of the Soviet and Chinese armies, but these tactics are adapted on the basis of experience gained during the Korean War, and the factors of METT-T. Unlike the Soviets, the NKPA has used little or no illumination and has avoided even bright moonlight, but there has been an increase in planning for illumination for conventional units.

Their doctrine emphasizes that half of all field training should be conducted at night and requires daylight reconnaissance before night operations. Plans include the use of night vision devices and illumination. Flares and searchlights may be used to mark targets and points of reference.

In the offense, the starting (attack) positions are located as close to the objective as possible. The army uses three types of formations for night movement—*column*, *standing abreast*, and *dispersed*. The *column* formation is used when the starting position is a great distance from the enemy positions; the *dispersed* formation is used when the starting position is near the enemy positions; and the *standing abreast* formation is the standard for night attack. A unit's "combat zone" has a narrower front and a shorter depth during night attacks. Battalion night

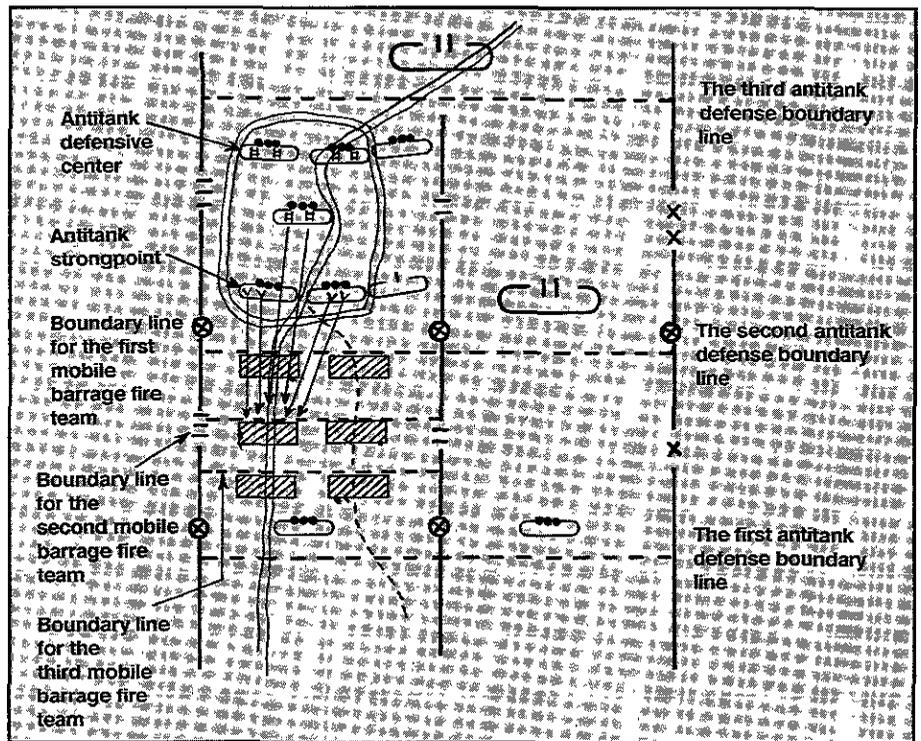


Figure 7. Antitank Defense Plan

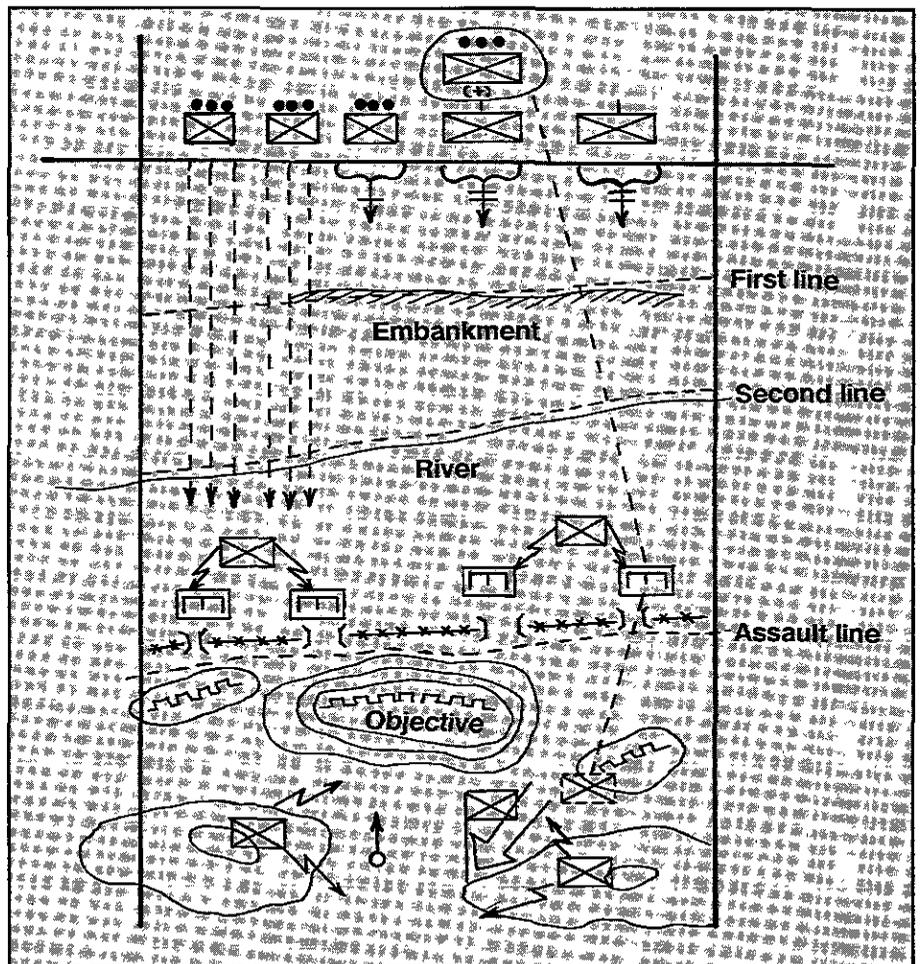


Figure 8. Battalion Night Attack Plan



attacks are usually conducted with only one echelon, all three companies on line (Figure 8). Each company retains a reinforced squad as a reserve.

A night defense differs from a daylight defense in that troops are positioned differently, and the fire support plan is changed. Preparations for a night defense are normally made during daylight hours. At night, troops are used for patrolling and filling in the gaps between elements. Reserves are near the line of defense, and one unit is designated the duty element. Ambush teams and sentries report any enemy attack and then withdraw. When the enemy approaches the firing zone, he is engaged with small arms and concentrated fire. When the enemy penetrates the defense line, he is engaged by troops firing at point blank range and then in hand-to-hand combat.

An airborne unit is used primarily to conduct raids, usually at night. Battalion-size airborne operations are conducted against such valuable objectives as an airfield or a field army command element. Units smaller than battalion are used to attack less important targets. After the raid is completed, airborne or airlifted forces try to link up with the advancing ground forces. If they cannot link up, the forces reorganize for aggressive defense using ambushes, raids, and counterattacks. Airborne operations may also be conducted in support of amphibious operations.

Air assault attacks (usually light infantry, but sometimes infantry or sniper) are coordinated with attacks by the main ground forces. Air assaults can be used in river crossing operations to seize favorable sites, reconnoiter the far bank, and protect river crossings from overwatching positions. Air

assault units are used to assist amphibious operations by supporting the landing and achieving tactical surprise. The North Koreans use the MD 500 helicopters, which are also used by South Korea.

The differences between conventional and guerrilla warfare are in the organization, tactics, missions, command, and area of operations. The NKPA has designed and fielded a special operations and unconventional warfare force that would conduct infiltration and quick-strike attacks throughout South Korea to support a conventional attack.

Guerrilla forces are organized from the assets of light infantry, sniper, or standard infantry battalions. They may not carry the heavy weapons, which are too bulky for guerrilla operations. Their missions include harassing the enemy's rear area and annihilating small enemy forces. (During the Iran-Iraq War, the North Koreans trained Iranian revolutionary guards in unconventional warfare techniques.) Guerrilla units may wear or carry civilian clothing or South Korean uniforms.

Several training references and aids on North Korea are available, and others will be available soon. These references include the following:

- *North Korea, The Foundations for Military Strength*, October 1991, and *Small Arms Identification and Operation Guide—Eurasian Communist Countries (U)*, DST-1100H-394076, 1 August 1983, put out by the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA).

- *North Korea People's Army Handbook*, April 1992, published by the Battle Command Training Program, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

- FC 100-2-99, *North Korean People's Army Operations*, December

1986, published by the Combined Arms Center Development Activity, also at Fort Leavenworth.

- FM 34-71, *Opposing Force: North Korea*, February 1982.

- CA-ST-91-1, *North Korean People's Army Operations and Tactics*, and CA-ST-91-2, *North Korean People's Army Troops, Organization, and Equipment*, both published by the 40th Infantry Division, California National Guard.

In addition, the U.S. Army Infantry School is producing an interactive video disk on North Korean equipment recognition for use by long-range surveillance units. This course will complement the Combat Vehicle Identification Course on Soviet/Warsaw Pact Equipment, which should be issued during the second quarter of Fiscal Year 1993. This course has five modules. Module 1 covers North Korean tanks and light armored vehicles; Module 2 covers North Korean self-propelled artillery and antiarmor weapons; Module 3 covers North Korean anti-aircraft guns, helicopters, and missiles; Module 4 covers North Korean engineer systems; and Module 5 covers the review and end-of-course test.

These disks operate on the Electronic Information Delivery System (EIDS) AN/GSH-55. These systems are available at Training and Doctrine Command schools and are available to the National Guard as well. Additional information on the course is available from Mr. Noble at DSN 835-4030; commercial (706) 545-4030.

The North Korean Army represents a sizable threat, and our own army must be prepared to fight against it and win. The first step in this process is to know how the North Korean People's Army is organized and equipped and how it fights.

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