



OPFOR Observations from the JRTC

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As the battlefield becomes more and more sophisticated, it becomes increasingly difficult for a commander to synchronize all his resources. Experiencing this problem under the realistic conditions at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) gives a commander a better understanding of the effectiveness of the Army's battlefield operating systems in similar types of environment.

Having served in the JRTC opposing force (OPFOR) during numerous rotations dealing with light, airborne, air assault, and Ranger units, we would like to offer some observations and advice from the OPFOR point of view. Although some of the problems we have seen have been at brigade and battalion level, our comments will focus on those at company and platoon level. Our purpose is to provide some insight

into the OPFOR's ability to disrupt each battlefield operating system, and into what we see as the common causes and remedies.

Intelligence

The shortcomings in intelligence at the JRTC lie in the basics and are to be found mostly at company and platoon level. The enemy situation is a critical part of the orders process that does not always receive honest treatment. Company commanders must ensure that their subordinates fully understand the enemy situation, including identification, organization, tactics, and equipment.

Because they do not understand the enemy, many soldiers poorly execute personnel search techniques. Units need to

spend more time looking for information of potential intelligence value, and leaders must ensure that their soldiers conduct proper searches of enemy dead and wounded. As on a real battlefield, there are no safe pockets—areas immune from search—at the JRTC.

Any intelligence source (prisoner, document, or piece of equipment) must be processed quickly. Units that capture OPFOR soldiers take an average of 24 hours to evacuate them to the rear for interrogation. By the time any information obtained is analyzed and sent to someone who can actually use it, it is practically worthless. On a fluid battlefield with a highly mobile enemy, a delay of 48 to 72 hours in getting information can be costly in terms of lost opportunities.

OPFOR soldiers, on the other hand, become familiar with the rotating units and are able to prioritize their searches to get the appropriate information. Units make the OPFOR searches even easier when their personnel carry complete operations orders, maps, graphics, overlays, and signal operating instructions on the battlefield. Leaders must see that they and their soldiers go into battle carrying as little information as possible.

Another part of operations security involves denying local civilians access to sensitive areas such as the brigade support area (BSA), the tactical operations center (TOC), and the firing batteries. (The OPFOR gathers a great deal of intelligence this way.) And once civilians do gain entry to a sensitive area, they must be escorted out promptly instead of being left to wander to another area of interest. On a real battlefield, units will have to deny access to these critical areas, especially in countries with active insurgency elements or general political unrest.

Maneuver

During the low intensity conflict (LIC) phase at the JRTC, units operate in large centralized elements against a small, irregular, and highly mobile guerrilla force. The guerrilla units are effective against a centralized force because they are flexible and can cover a large area. Units succeed when they have centralized command while maintaining effective decentralized control: Effective decentralized operations and control originate at squad and platoon level.

Unit battle drills are key to success on any battlefield, and successful drills must be thoroughly rehearsed and trained, from individual soldier to platoon level. Individual soldiers must instinctively take the initiative on contact to seek cover and return fire, and only training experience will enable them to assess the situation and react quickly. Too often at the JRTC, individual soldiers wait for instructions from team or squad leaders before taking even the most rudimentary actions against an attacking OPFOR.

Squads and platoons must be well-versed in all battle drills, but particularly in actions on contact. They must quickly react to contact, assess the situation, and develop it to their units' advantage. Quick reaction, rapid development, and mobility are essential if a unit is to bring overwhelming firepower to bear against a small, highly mobile OPFOR. Units in contact seem to take too long to assess the situation before

reacting, thus allowing the OPFOR to control the situation, maintain the momentum, and dictate the outcome of the engagement.

If small units have individuals and subordinate elements with the initiative and the capacity to react to contact quickly and in a decentralized fashion, the enemy is kept off balance and loses the advantage. In addition, following a contact with the OPFOR, a unit must quickly consolidate and reorganize to prepare for further operations. A unit cannot be effective if it is so fragmented that there is no control at the leader level; a fragmented force will not be as capable of resisting when and if the OPFOR returns to engage it again. Security is therefore essential throughout this process.

Security is especially vital during LIC because the enemy is virtually everywhere. From start to finish, security must be

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enforced by leaders and practiced by individual soldiers. Many times, complacency and a false sense of security in numbers prevail in company assembly areas and platoon patrol bases, and this complacency spills over into movements and halts during movement.

When moving, whether mounted or dismounted, soldiers need to be alert, aware of their surroundings, and actively seeking out the enemy. Frequently, the OPFOR can easily track and monitor a unit during movement, and can choose when to conduct limited harassment attacks or sniper missions, such as when the unit encounters restrictive terrain, is crossing a bridge, or during halts. Actions at halts must be rehearsed and regulated in terms of the dispersion of forces and the level of security to be maintained.

Although security is just as vital in a defensive position or battle position as in any other mission, security often appears to be relaxed during the defensive phase in the main battle positions. Nowhere is this more evident than in the positions that overwatch obstacles. As a result, OPFOR reconnaissance elements or advance motorized elements are frequently able to dismantle an obstacle, open and mark a breach lane, or move around until they discover a suitable bypass route. Security must be an ongoing process that includes a coordinated effort between soldiers and leaders.

Synchronization and a coordinated effort are essential aspects of the modern battlefield, particularly in light of the large amount of resources available to a commander. In numerous rotations, however, especially during the LIC stage and the deliberate attack, actions against the OPFOR seem fragmented and uncoordinated. For example, the mechanized infantry-armor team and the light forces fighting against the

OPFOR appear to operate as two distinct forces that are not using their capabilities to benefit each other. In addition, in the defense phase of a rotation, the mechanized-armor team's main antitank firepower is wasted because it is not tied in with the main battle positions.

Integration also extends into Army aviation, which can be highly successful when used properly. On most rotations the aerial hunter-killer teams do an excellent job of impeding and harassing OPFOR operations; in fact, they are a main OPFOR concern during mission planning. In finding and fix-

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ing enemy forces, these teams are excellent, but in trying to finish the enemy, the ground forces need to be well integrated with the aerial elements. Highly mobile forces (from the mechanized-armor team or from an air assault) that rapidly move into the area work well with the attack and scout aircraft. The need for a coordinated effort can be seen during all missions, especially the search and attack.

The search and attack mission in any LIC operation plays an integral role in flushing an enemy or forcing his hand. It is therefore vital that the search and attack be aggressively executed, from individual up to company level. Soldiers must always be attentive and actively seeking out the enemy. They must heed the obvious signs of enemy activity and investigate or report anything out of the ordinary. Soldiers' loads should be carefully considered, because carrying too much weight further hastens the fatigue process, hindering their attentiveness and reducing their mobility.

At platoon and company levels, there are numerous concerns. Platoons and companies during LIC generally fail to clear a complete sector, partly because they often use the modified wedge formation exclusively. As a result, when a platoon or company clears a sector, it actually clears only a seam through the sector. This technique leaves vast tracts of land untouched—in particular, the sector's most undesirable and densest portions. Also, once in contact, or once they discover an OPFOR element, platoons and companies fail to pursue it actively or aggressively. Normally, the effort bogs down in reorganization, consolidation, and evacuation, which allows the OPFOR to escape and continue harassing the small units. To cover the sector adequately and to aid in mobility and flexibility, units must maintain their focus and operate decentralized. Finally, the commander must determine, before the operation is initiated, whether the search and attack will be terrain oriented or focused solely on the enemy.

Fire Support

Generally, the use of indirect fires against the OPFOR does not keep it from executing its mission as planned. Whether

this is because fire support assets are improperly positioned or because the unit tightly controls fire missions, the OPFOR seldom loses soldiers to indirect fire. During LIC, the light infantry units that are in contact should have 60mm mortars at their disposal. Fire support at company level must support maneuver elements at the lowest possible level. For example, once the main effort for a company mission is identified, the mortar section should support that effort. Also, key leaders must constantly track their location and that of the mortar section so they can quickly call for fire when the need arises. Every soldier should have the skills to call in indirect fire.

One indirect fire technique witnessed at the JRTC is that of harassing and interdicting (H&I) fires; these fires are normally inadequate because they are terrain oriented rather than enemy oriented and driven by the available intelligence. The reliance on and overuse of H&I fires is therefore wasteful, considering that these types of fire missions are normally unobserved, and thus unadjusted, even when close to a target. In addition, H&I fires can compromise a unit's intent for future operations and give the OPFOR a clear picture of where the unit's forces stand in the reconnaissance and counterreconnaissance battle. Whenever unadjusted rounds are fired repeatedly, the OPFOR can assume that the mortars do not yet know its exact location.

During the deliberate attack, units often fail to interdict with indirect fires and impede the OPFOR in establishing its defense. Few indirect fire missions other than H&I are fired to disrupt the vulnerable OPFOR elements. The OPFOR combat outposts and scout screen can normally thwart any attempt at emplacing reconnaissance elements close enough to provide corrections for fire missions. The OPFOR continues to construct 18 inches of overhead cover on its positions within 24 hours of occupation. Also, preparatory fires on the deliberate attack are alarmingly inadequate, especially when not adjusted. Close air support (CAS) can truly save attacking forces by making up for their lack of indirect fires. Still,

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units must do a better job of synchronizing indirect fire and CAS to soften the OPFOR battle positions just before the main attack.

A different aspect of the indirect fire battle concerns the need to destroy the OPFOR's fire support resources. In this area of the battle, the AN/TPQ-36 and AN/TPQ-37 counterbattery radars are essential. The Q-36 may be the most damaging tool available with which to alter and hamper the OPFOR's indirect fire operations. The Q-36 saves friendly lives by pinpointing the OPFOR's deadly indirect fire assets and targeting them for destruction. OPFOR mortar squads,

which cannot move far from their firing positions, are susceptible to the sweeping of a suspect area by a maneuver force on the basis of a Q-36 reading. It is therefore critical that the Q-36 be kept operational at all times. This means maintaining tight security, camouflage, and deception; using a false Q-36 complete with generator and jumping frequently; and digging in whenever possible. (See also "The Q-36 Weapons Locating Radar: A Primer for Brigade Commanders and Staffs," by Lieutenant Colonel William A. Sweet, in *INFANTRY*, May-June 1994, pages 14-17.)

Mobility, Countermobility, Survivability

To maintain flexibility, units must clear and secure their main supply routes (MSRs). This is difficult and time-consuming, but necessary if the lines of communication are to remain open. A unit that does not fully secure or clear an MSR hampers its own resupply efforts and general mobility. Furthermore, units must report and track the location of an OPFOR minefield to avoid having other convoys run into the same one. This is a two-fold emphasis: First, if the area is cleared of both mines and personnel in the immediate vicinity, the minefield is not likely to be emplaced again. Second, if a net call is made, or each major command is contacted separately and given the location of the minefield, units can avoid it. The mechanized-armor teams are ideally suited to clearing and securing the MSRs if they properly use their overwhelming firepower to overwatch while their dismounts clear the road and the off-road areas in the immediate vicinity. Unfortunately, the OPFOR rarely sees dismounted soldiers from the mechanized-armor teams performing this task.

Countermobility plays an important role in defensive and retrograde operations. It is important that leaders develop a solid defensive plan that includes the engineers and an explicit priority of effort for them. Few of the defensive obstacle plans at the JRTC seem to fit into the overall defen-

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sive scheme; they rarely delay, slow, channel, turn, or stop the OPFOR. The obstacles are easily breached by OPFOR tracks or personnel, or they are by-passed.

Obstacles are usually linear and are rarely tied in with the terrain or another complex obstacle. In addition, in the rare cases when obstacles are adequately covered by an overwatching element, security is lax and the obstacles can be breached clandestinely. Early warning devices or booby traps in, on, and around obstacles can deter such clandestine breaching. One or two good observed obstacles at keychoke points, tied in with restrictive terrain, are more effective than

six or seven mediocre—and unobserved—obstacles in various locations.

During the defense, time and engineer effort should also be allocated to survivability, especially when considering OPFOR doctrine and the heavy reliance on preparatory fires in the attack. In fact, survivability should be the first priority when conducting a defense, and soldiers should be trained to prepare and fight from positions with at least 18 inches of overhead cover. When an infantryman's battle position is being attacked, his place of duty is in his fighting position,

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not lying down behind it, and adequate overhead cover will permit him to effectively man his position.

Some other general observations: The OPFOR can easily detect surface-laid mines from afar and breach or bypass them. Uncamouflaged engineer stockage points quickly reveal defensive locations to OPFOR reconnaissance elements. Breaching elements must follow the guidelines of SOSR (suppress, obscure, secure, and reduce) and must not allow breaching and assault elements to bunch up close to the obstacle. Most breaches can be handled with vigorously executed battle drills.

Air Defense Artillery

Stinger teams at the JRTC are lucrative targets and generally lack security. They are easy to find because of poor camouflage techniques and their practice of locating on key terrain. The Stinger vehicle is unique on the battlefield, and its boxes of ammunition and antennas are easily identifiable, even from a distance.

Adding to the Stinger teams' problems is the way they are employed. They are normally sent out far in advance of the maneuver forces with no local security. As a result, they often become disoriented and run into OPFOR ambushes or minefields. In many instances, it seems that the air defense elements have not been fully informed of the friendly and enemy activity in their areas of operation. Many of the communication problems and operational deficiencies could be eliminated if the air defense units trained regularly with the maneuver battalions to which they are attached.

Obviously, there is not enough manpower to provide all Stinger teams with a dedicated security force 24 hours a day; this would also increase the size of their signatures. But when the teams are moving into position, especially as brigade assets, the brigade should furnish security for them, perhaps in the form of a military police (MP) escort.

As for Stinger team employment, an effective method is for the teams to use a hide position and several firing positions with a few missiles cached at each. In this way, a team

can move after firing, carrying only the launcher apparatus and the radio from the vehicle. Each team can be sustained for a longer time from the hide position where its vehicle and bulky supplies are cached. And even if an enemy finds one firing position, the team will still be able to fire from the remaining positions and caches.

Combat Service Support

A unit's ability to sustain itself plays a critical role in its success on the battlefield. This applies to the combat arms soldiers as well as the combat service support (CSS) soldiers. One problem units have in CSS is the individual soldier's load. An infantryman's load should sustain him for two or three days, but this does not mean he has to carry a large amount of equipment and material. He should carry only what he needs to survive, while the company and battalion trains carry most of the unit's supplies and rations. (When a soldier carries weights in excess of 90 to 100 pounds, his overall performance decreases rapidly. He becomes a pack mule instead of an alert soldier, and his focus shifts from completing the mission to dropping his rucksack.)

Unfortunately, company trains, BSAs, and other logistical sites and activities on the JRTC battlefield are now prime targets of opportunity for indirect fires or raids. These logistic areas are easy to find because of their size (which seems to get bigger and bigger) and the amount of noise and light they generate. In short, these support areas have simply grown too large and cumbersome to be so close to the forward areas. The simplicity of control, made easier by the consolidation of most of the support efforts in one location, has been negated by complexity and other problems such as light, noise, and physical security. One quick-fix is to disperse some of the logistical systems and to forbid the collocation of such unrelated assets as a field artillery TOC and a battalion aid station.

Too little emphasis is placed on the defense and security of these sites. Units rarely take measures to keep OPFOR forces

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from gaining easy entry to such areas, nor do they use warning devices or security patrols to deter OPFOR activity around them. In addition, these areas are usually defended by a collection of support personnel, attached soldiers, or soldiers on profiles instead of a force trained to execute battle drills against the OPFOR.

The soldiers ambushed by the OPFOR on resupply missions are usually poorly briefed on their routes, the enemy situation, and the mission. Leaders and soldiers neglect to

conduct thorough pre-combat inspections before resupply operations, which leads an ill-prepared element to embark on a mission destined for failure. Convoys encounter ambushes, enter minefields, or get lost.

Convoys should always have some form of security, whether it is the mechanized-armor team or MPs. The support element conducting the mission must be properly pre-

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pared to enter a combat environment. These soldiers cannot rely solely on the escort element to transport them safely to their destination; they must be prepared to assume the roles of protector and navigator in the event the escort unit is distracted or destroyed. Additionally, the logistics command and control nodes must ensure that the entire support mission is also treated as a combat operation.

Casualty evacuation is another area that requires work. Units need to rehearse the evacuation process, from platoon to battalion level, so they can maintain their momentum in the battle. The evacuation process too often diverts a unit's focus and becomes the primary objective of an operation. Throughout the process, they must also remember to maintain security, especially when considering the vulnerability of everyone involved, including the casualties themselves.

If CSS elements are to provide full support, the training of soldiers of all specialties must concentrate on basic fighting skills as well as on their own MOS skills. This training not only benefits the CSS soldiers but also frees the infantry soldiers from providing security for them.

Command and Control

Two things that can make command and control difficult are a confusing or complex commander's intent statement and a plan that has too many working parts. A unit seldom has any control over the number of parts to a plan, but a simple, straightforward commander's intent can help all the parts of the plan fall into place. In his intent statement, a commander must strive for the single goal of victory, simply stating the purpose, the method of achieving that purpose, and the desired end state once it is achieved.

Another mistake commanders often make at the JRTC is that they do not coordinate all their resources. The varied assets on the battlefield are often committed piecemeal, with only one portion of the available resources being used at any given time. This applies all the way up and down the chain of command, from the battalion commander who fails to coordinate for mechanized convoy security during LIC (allowing several convoys to be ambushed) down to the

company commander who has his soldiers spend 24 hours digging fighting positions when, with a little forethought, he could have had the engineer small emplacement excavator do it in half the time. An unimaginative plan often results in poor execution and—predictably—poor results.

Commanders need to be aware that when soldiers work for long periods, they become fatigued two or three days into a

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rotation and therefore less motivated. Focus and organization—accomplishing tasks without wasted effort are the best ways to alleviate some fatigue and morale problems. Soldiers should be required to work hard when it is time to work and then be allowed to sleep without interruption when it is time to sleep.

Something that may not be so obvious is over-preparation at higher levels at the expense of preparation and training at lower levels. It appears, from our conversations with countless soldiers rotating through the JRTC, that most home-station training is geared to company or battalion level exercises that focus on the battalion staff and company planning processes. By contrast, the great strength of the OPFOR is that its small-unit leaders exercise initiative, using soldiers who are highly proficient in basic marksmanship and individual and team movement techniques. And the soldiers agree on one thing: The OPFOR wins most direct-fire contacts at the JRTC. The OPFOR trains at the individual, team, and squad levels almost to the exclusion of platoon or higher operations. The OPFOR has learned the hard way, through

many battles, that if individual soldiers can fight, teams and squads will succeed, and if teams and squads succeed, the entire unit will succeed.

Before any plan can be successful, each soldier must be able to shoot, move, and communicate. And he must be able to exercise responsible initiative to develop the situation, reacting with his team and squad in a coordinated manner. In fact, when these skills are in place, the planning process is simpler, because the soldiers will assist in the successful conclusion of the plan instead of being a hindrance or just another asset that requires coordination and supervision.

To succeed at the JRTC or on a real battlefield, all leaders must fully understand the battlefield operating systems and the way they depend upon one another to achieve success. At the same time, however, true success is decided by the force that has mastered the basics. Individual soldier skills and sound squad and platoon tactics are the keys to success on the battlefield.

Well-trained soldiers and highly competent junior leaders are the OPFOR's main threat. If units concentrate on the basics and conduct operations using centralized command and decentralized control, they will succeed.

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