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THE DEFEAT OF TASK FORCE SMITH 20 October 1993

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The darkest Days of the Korean War witnessed the defeat of Task Force Smith. 43 years of effort by the U.S. military leadership has reversed every negative aspect of this debacle save one: the outcome.

The 48 years since the end of the Second World War have seen U.S. combat formations undergo significant changes in response to the evolving strategic environment. The most dramatic of these changes have occurred in the realm of training and technology. Whereas U.S. troops entering the Korean conflict were inadequately trained and equipped, massive efforts have largely redressed these deficiencies. Indeed, the United States currently possesses one of the best equipped and trained armies in the world. Much has also been made of this high degree of training and technology in fighting outnumbered and winning against Warsaw Pact (WP) type forces. In reality, however, little real world data exists to substantiate the claims of those who believe that our goals in this area have been achieved. On the other hand, a large quantity of high-fidelity evidence does exist to support a study of the relative combat effectiveness of U.S. units versus a WP type threat. It resides in the training in which the U.S. military has invested enormous time and effort to make as realistic as possible. The irony is that the data compiled during these training engagements strongly suggests that something is still very much broken in the tactical combat arena.

This study utilizes a comparative analysis to illustrate a significant stagnation in the combat effectiveness of U.S. combat formations over the past 45 years. To make this point as strongly as possible, the ill-fated Task Force Smith from the Korean War is used as the benchmark against which a similar present day formation is measured. The study first summarizes the events surrounding TF Smith, paying particular attention to various indicators of combat effectiveness and the results achieved. A similar assessment is then conducted using a recent Combat Maneuver Training Center (CMTTC) rotation by a Europe-based light infantry unit tasked with a similar mission. While comparing TF Smith with an elite present day formation seemingly borders on the absurd, the comparison actually provides a dramatic illustration of the lack of effective tactics and procedures utilized by present day U.S. combat units.

The conclusion: U.S. tactical doctrine is broken, at least as far as light infantry in the defense is concerned. At the heart of the problem is the systematic failure to concentrate decisive combat power against the enemy's Center of Gravity (COG). This failure derives from two principle causes: (1) Failure to concentrate key combat assets; and (2) The failure to utilize maneuver to position assets for a strike against the flank and/or rear of the enemy. In short, while individual training and modern technology are important, the absence of maneuver warfare tactical training effectively negates both of these force multipliers.

TASK FORCE SMITH – 5 JULY 1950

Task Force Smith, the battalion combat team representing the advance element of the 24th Infantry Division in 1950, was ill-prepared in almost every way to meet its North Korean adversaries. A listing of

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these deficiencies is of value in providing a comparative basis for the points raised later in this study. Some, though by no means all, of the shortcomings that plagued TF Smith included:

- **Cohesion and Training.** The Task Force was hastily assembled and had not trained as a unit prior to deployment. Link-up with the supporting artillery battery took place just hours before the battle occurred.
- **Equipment.** The anti-armor weapons and fire support assets available to the Task Force were inadequate to address the threat. In total, TF Smith possessed two 75mm recoilless rifles and six 2.36 inch Bazookas. The supporting artillery possessed just six anti-tank capable HEAT rounds. Subsequent experience found the Soviet supplied T-34/85 tanks used by the North Koreans to be impervious to the Bazookas from any angle, including point blank rear shots.
- **Preparation Time.** TF Smith was allowed only a few hours in which to prepare for the North Korean onslaught. The unit arrived at its designated defensive positions at 3 a.m. and was engaged by 8 am the same day.
- **Support.** The unit was unsupported by air assets and possessed only a single 6-gun 105mm howitzer battery to provide supporting fires.
- **Intelligence Preparation.** TF Smith “went in blind.” There was no reliable intelligence regarding the enemy.
- **The Odds.** Task Force Smith consisted of the 406 members of 1st Battalion, 21st Infantry Regiment, 24th Infantry Division, and a battery of 105mm guns with 134 men. These 540 men and 6 guns faced approximately 5000 North Korean troops and 33 T-34/85 tanks. These numbers represented front line troops engaged in the fighting.
- **The Enemy:** TF Smith faced elements of the 4th North Korean Division, a formation that had been fully blooded in previous engagements. Study of the 4th NK Division actions during the battle indicates an experienced, determined adversary.

THE RESULT

Outnumbered by more than 10:1 and vastly outgunned, TF Smith was defeated in approximately three hours of intense combat. Despite numerous disadvantages, TF Smith destroyed five T-34/85s and inflicted several hundred casualties on the enemy. The Task Force and its attached artillery suffered approximately 33% losses in personnel and 50% - 100% losses in equipment.

3/325th AIRBORNE BATTALION COMBAT TEAM – 20 OCTOBER 1993

3rd Battalion, 325th Airborne Battalion Combat Team (ABCT), an elite unit stationed in Vicenza, Italy, executed a hasty defense in sector during the final phase of its Combat Maneuver Training Center (CMTTC) training event at Hohenfels training area near Vilseck, Germany. The terrain and mission of the

3/325th were generally similar to that assigned TF Smith 43 years earlier. Most of the similarity ended there, however, as the following table illustrates:

- **Cohesion and Training.** The 3/325 ABCT benefited from as high a level of unit training and cohesion as can be found anywhere in the U.S. Army, and arguably higher than that found in most other units.
- **Equipment.** 3/325, by virtue of its status as an independently deployed combat team, was more heavily equipped than most light/airborne infantry units in the U.S. Army. Particularly noteworthy was the assignment of a Combat Support Company boasting 20 HMMVW-mounted TOW launchers (normal light infantry battalions have only four). Additionally, the unit possessed numerous medium and light anti-tank weapons, providing a robust anti-armor capability.
- **Preparation Time.** 3/325 was allotted nearly 36 hours to prepare before the enemy main force attacked on the morning of 20 October. These 36 hours did not include a previous five-day period during which the unit conducted low and medium intensity operations over the terrain they knew they would later be called upon to defend. As a result of this luxury, 3/325 was able to thoroughly prepare for the enemy's attack, including conducting pre-battle rehearsals to insure maximum readiness.
- **Support.** The availability of supporting assets for the 3/325 defense certainly seemed to be more than adequate. Support available to 3/325 included:
 - One battalion, 155mm SP (M109)
 - One Attack Helicopter Company (AH-64)
 - One battery, MLRS
 - CH-47 and UH-60 heavy airlift
 - One heavy combat engineer company
 - Two MP companies
 - CA, PSYOPS, and logistical augmentation
 - C3 Assets provided by HQ, Berlin Brigade.
- **Intelligence Preparation.** The intelligence preparation was exhaustive. Intelligence estimates developed to support the scenario provided approximate information on the type, location, and size of the enemy forces. Furthermore, the intelligence data provided explicitly stated the enemy objective (the town of Ubungsdorf in the 3/325th rear).
- **The Odds.** 3/325 Airborne Combat Team totaled nearly 1,000 troops including attachments. The enemy consisted of a former Warsaw Pact Motorized Rifle Battalion (MRB) consisting of approximately 500 troops as well as supporting artillery. 3/325 ABCT, on defensive terrain of

its choosing, outnumbered the attacking enemy by approximately 2:1. The odds regarding major weapons systems were equally favorable. The only heavy weapons available to the attacking MRB were 10 T-72 tanks (simulated by M60A3 MBT) concentrated in the MRB's single tank company. Twenty-four BMPs were simulated by M113 APCs and mounted nothing larger than .50 cal HMGs. In contrast, 3/325th possessed over 100 anti-tank weapons of various types, each specifically designed to destroy tanks and other armor of considerably higher quality than the M60s and M113s employed by the OPFOR.

- **The Enemy.** The CMTC OPFOR that faced 3/325 were highly trained and intimately familiar with the terrain over which they were operating. At the same time, most 3/325 personnel were also familiar with the terrain, having faced almost exactly the same scenario just twelve months previously. Finally, the OPFOR advantage in this area was further reduced by the controller requirement that they adhere to standard former Warsaw Pact tactics. The result was a highly trained and experienced adversary that nonetheless presented a very predictable threat.

Table 1 summarizes the key differences between TF Smith and 3/325 ABCT as they entered their respective engagements:

	<i>Task Force Smith</i>	<i>3/325th ABCT</i>
Training	Inadequate	Extensive
Equipment	Minimal/Obsolete	Plentiful/State of the Art
Preparation Time	5 hours	36 hours
Support Assets	1 Btry, 105mm HOW	1 Battalion, 155mm SP HOW 1 Company, Attack Helo 1 Btry, MLRS CH47 and UH60 airlift 1 Hvy ENG Company 2 MP Companies Assorted CSS and C3 assets
Intel Prep	None	Exhaustive
Odds	Greater than 10:1 against	Less than 1:2 against
Duration of Engagement	3 hours	Less than 2 hours

Table 1.

Few would disagree that the situation facing 3/325 bears little resemblance to that encountered by TF Smith, with the exception of the terrain and the mission. There is, however, one similarity that is as unlikely as it is devastating.

THE RESULT

3/325 ABCT was overrun during the course of approximately 90 minutes of combat with the CMTC OPFOR. Losses totaled approximately 80% of the unit's troops and equipment. The OPFOR losses amounted to approximately 20%. In the end, 3/325 destroyed 6 of the crucial T-72s while losing all of their TOW systems to destruction or ammunition depletion. By way of comparison, TF Smith destroyed 5 North Korean T-34/85s even though it possessed only three anti-tank systems capable of defeating the threat.

HOW IS THIS POSSIBLE?

If readers note that something is fundamentally wrong with the picture just painted, this author would agree. Under normal circumstances, it would seem to be impossible to achieve the type of result just outlined unless the defenders beat themselves. In this author's opinion, that was very much the case.

THE REASONS

The single biggest factor for accounting for the catastrophic failure of the 3/325th can be simply identified:

Failure to Exert Decisive Force Against the Enemy's Center of Gravity

There are a series of factors that contributed to this failure. First, however, one must identify the all-important Center of Gravity (COG). In this case, the identification of the CMTC OPFOR COG is simple: 10 enemy tanks, conveniently acting in a single (and therefore easily identifiable) unit. Decisive force would also appear to be simple: 20 HMMVW-mounted TOWs. Certainly, other weapons systems contribute, but this author believes the TOWs are at the heart of it.

What, then, are these contributors that led to such a disastrous failure? There are several; combined, they are more than capable of producing the type of calamity that overcame 3/325. These include:

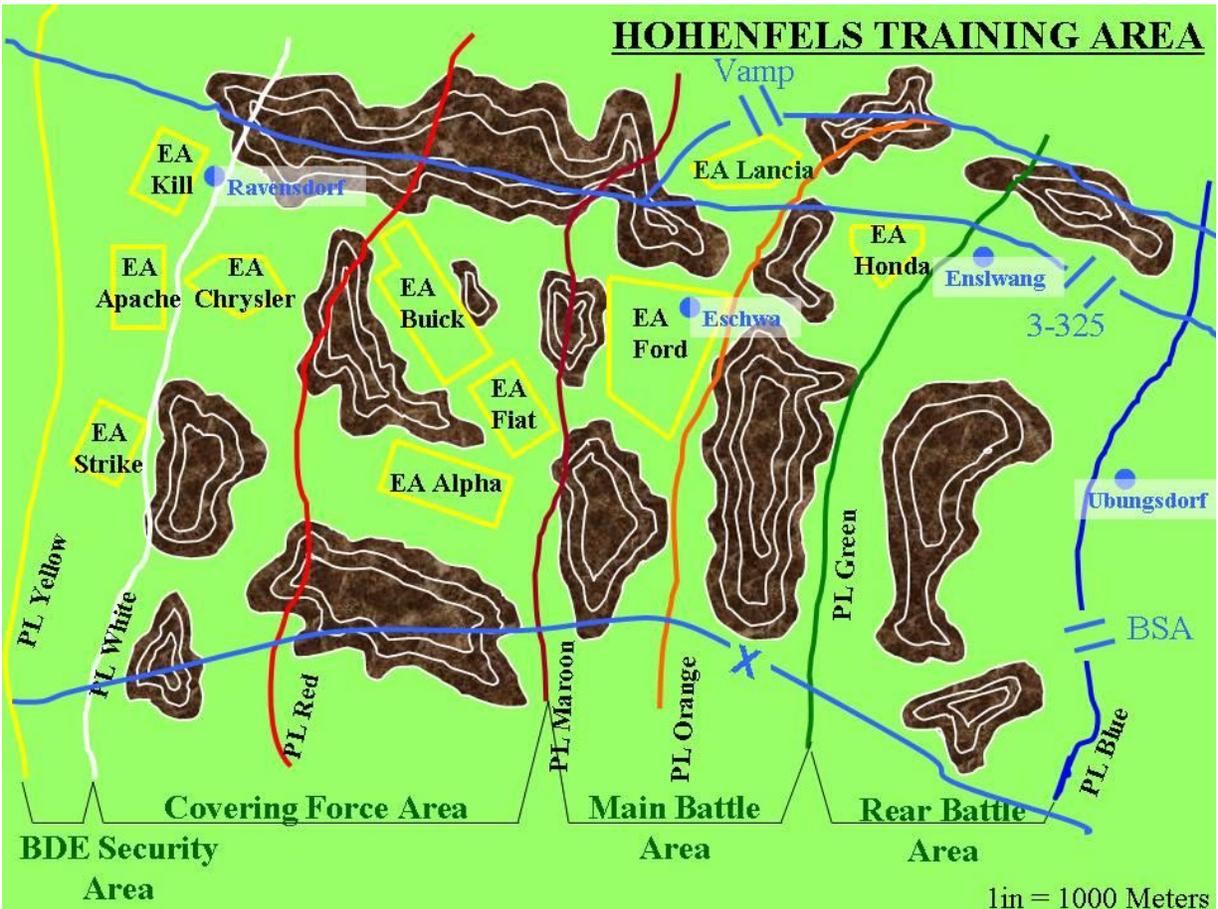
- **Attrition warfare based on defense throughout the depth of the battlefield.**
- **Dispersal of key tank killer assets throughout the battle area pursuant to the defense in depth.**
- **Complete abandonment of mobility with the resultant inability to counter enemy movements.**
- **Overdependence on "support assets" including Field Artillery Scatterable Mines (FASCAM) and attack helicopters.**

1. Attrition Warfare

In the broadest sense, the failure to exert decisive force stems from the continued U.S. emphasis on attrition-style warfare. Despite efforts by the U.S. military leadership in recent years to move away from linear, attrition focused warfare, overwhelming emphasis is still placed on head-to-head slug fests. Significantly, the 3/325th commander, in briefing the proposed defensive arrangement to his Brigade Commander, emphasized his intention to “attrit the enemy throughout the depth of the battle area.” Nor was this frowned upon by the Brigade Commander or the CMTC evaluators. The 3/325th commander was subsequently complimented on the care and professionalism with which the defensive battle had been conducted. After all, the commander was simply employing the tactics taught at Command and General Staff College (CGSC). Unfortunately, neither the CMTC leadership nor the 3/325 leadership thought to question the fundamental tactical 'truths' espoused by the Army’s tactical doctrine. The result was a defeat, which, though more severe than the TF Smith disaster, was actually judged a qualified success by the evaluators.

2. Defense in Depth and the Engagement Area

Pursuant to the attrition style warfare that holds sway in the Army, the 3/325 commander developed Engagement Areas (EA) throughout the battle area. He then 'developed' these EAs to the fullest extent, parceling out his TOWs and other anti-tank weapons systems to cover each area. Map 1 provides a rough idea of the placement of these EAs. Each EA was provided with its complement of defending assets, as well as mines, obstacles, defensive fire coordination, and so on. As Map 1 shows, the location of the various EAs was based on fields of fire developed along each of the possible enemy avenues of approach.



Map 1: Hohenfels Training Area

3. Abandonment of Mobility

At first, it seems difficult to believe that any defending commander would totally abandon mobility in the face of a highly mobile opponent, and yet this is essentially what occurred. The 3/325th commander, like most U.S. light infantry leaders, had been taught that light infantry movement of any kind once the battle is joined is suicidal. Furthermore, when the commander obliged doctrine by deploying forces in depth throughout the battle area, real immobility was effectively created! Mobility assets available to the 3/325 commander included the Combat Support Company with 20 TOW mounted HMMVWs, enough rotary wing lift to airmobile at least one of the infantry companies, and—in the last extreme—over fifty vehicles of all types scattered throughout the battalion. Eschewing these capabilities, the commander dispersed the TOW vehicles around static EAs, effectively turning a mobile asset into an immobile one. When the commander spread infantry assets throughout the battle area in a like manner, the air mobile assets were also rendered useless. Finally, the commander did not concentrate available vehicles, and these became non-assets as well. Most of all, because the commander was firmly wedded to the concept of static, attrition-based defense in-depth, the types of mobility just described were useless because “mobility” of this type was outside the commander’s paradigm for dealing with the situation.

HOW IS THIS POSSIBLE? STEP BY STEP

Map 1 represents a rough sketch of the defensive terrain occupied by 3/325 on the morning of 20 October 1993. As this map illustrates, the defense was segmented into a series of EAs designed to guard against an enemy advance along one of three previously identified avenues of approach. Primary among these were EAs Buick, Ford, Lancia, Honda, and Toyota, although other EAs were also identified. The stated intent of the defending commander is outlined below:

I INTEND TO DESTROY FORCES IN ENGAGEMENT AREA FORD. WE WILL DO THAT BY KILLING HIS RECON WELL FORWARD, KILLING AND ATTRITING HIM AND HIS INFANTRY IN RESTRICTIVE TERRAIN WITH MASSIVE FIRES OF THE ARTILLERY AND TOWS ON CRITICAL POINTS ON THE BATTLEFIELD. SUCCESS IS PREVENTING ANY PENETRATION BEYOND PL GREEN AND NOT ALLOWING THE ENEMY TO ESCAPE.

According to the plan, the battle should have proceeded as follows:

Step 1: Enemy recon is stripped away by the forward defenders. This serves two functions: depriving the enemy of intelligence on friendly dispositions and determining the avenue of approach of the enemy main body.

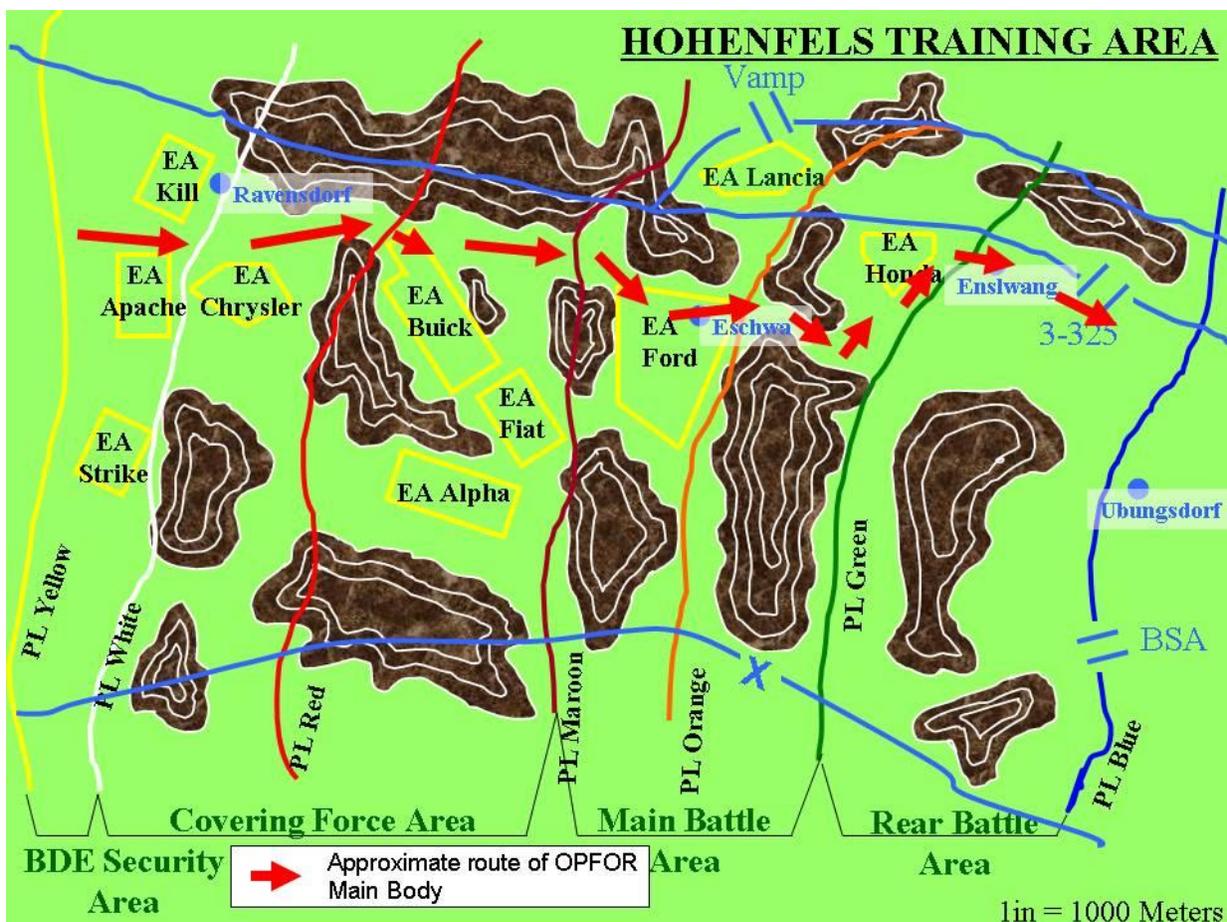
Step 2: The enemy main body is attrited as it passes through the various EAs on the way to its objective.

Step 3: Remaining enemy forces are destroyed in EA FORD.

Unfortunately, this is not what happened. Why? Examination of the step by step process in a more critical light is revealing.

Step 1: *Enemy recon is stripped away by the forward defenders.* Clearly this effort, if successful, will be of benefit to the defenders. In the case of 3/325 this effort was only partially successful. Nonetheless, identification of the enemy main body was accomplished by the TF Tactical Operations Center at approximately 0600 local time.

The irony in step 1 is that the effort in identifying the enemy main body was of very limited use to 3/325. While the TF commander could concentrate artillery fire on the avenue thus identified, **artillery rarely kills armor.** Furthermore, the supporting FASCAM and attack helicopters upon which the defense depended so heavily failed to act effectively based on this information. As a result, the only thing the information told the commander was the direction from which the unit's destruction would arrive. This is because in employing the assets throughout the battle area centered on static EAs, any ability **on the part of the 3/325th ABCT itself** to react to the intelligence was eliminated.

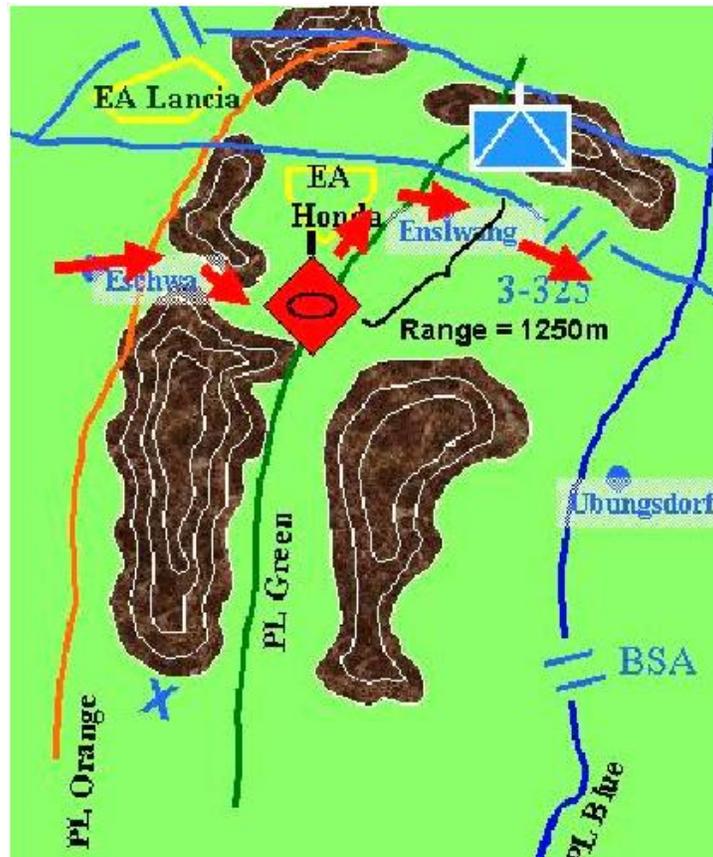


Map 2: OPFOR Main Body route of advance

Step 2: *Attrition of the enemy main body as it passes through the various EAs on the way to its objective.* This step is both the most important phase of the battle and central to the defeat of the 3/325. In “developing” the five Engagement Areas outlined in the mission statement, the commander deployed his assets centered on the EAs and weighted according to what was seen as the most likely enemy avenue of approach. As Map 2 illustrates, this forced the enemy to face defenders in multiple EAs. Unfortunately, this deployment meant the fragmentation of the CSC TOWs into small elements scattered across these same EAs.

Question: As the enemy main body approached each EA, what opposition was present? **Answer:** 3 TOW vehicles.

Granted, there were other assets defending the EAs, but it comes down to the TOWs. When the TOWs engaged, the odds in terms of major weapons systems were over 3:1 in favor of the attacker. Simply put, all 10 of the T-72s were present, while only three of the TOWs were available at the point of contact. Worse, the TOWs were emplaced in such a way as to achieve hits at maximum range. This turned out to require a frontal shot at something less than 1500 meters due to the constricted terrain. The end result was foreseeable; the three TOWs were quickly identified, suppressed, and either destroyed or forced to run for their lives.



Map 3

Map 3, illustrating an engagement that took place near Enslwang, provides an excellent example of this phenomena. (In case the reader finds the example implausible, the author witnessed precisely this sequence of events, although the enemy tank company was somewhat depleted; the enemy was “passing through” the last Engagement Area on the way to Ubungsdorf). This scenario was played out over and over again as the enemy passed through the EAs.

Conclusion: Static employment in depth all but guaranteed the defeat in detail of the 3/325th ABCT. At every point of contact, the enemy achieved decisive combat superiority while remaining significantly outnumbered by the defenders as a whole.

Step 3. *Destruction of the remaining enemy forces in EA FORD.* This step was clearly overcome by events, but there is a significant point to be made here. While EAs were developed throughout the battle area, the one location that was left entirely undefended was Ubungsdorf! This was the one objective specified by the scenario intelligence preparation, yet it was the one area in the sector that was completely undefended. According to U.S. tactical doctrine, the commander was correct in this approach. The defense was designed “by the book” and assumed that the enemy would be fully attrited prior to reaching the town—this despite the fact that such a defense had been attempted by 3/325 one year previously with disastrous results. (Even were the 3/325 commander new to his command, the previous rotation AAR data was readily available). This knowing pursuit of a clearly unsuccessful defensive scheme speaks volumes about the triumph of process over creativity in U.S. tactical doctrine.

THE “SUPPORT” DILEMMA

Another grave error on the part of the defenders was over-reliance on “supporting assets” and under-reliance on the inherent combat power of 3/325th ABCT. While supporting assets such as FASCAM and attack helicopters can provide a decisive edge, extensive CMTC and JRTC data indicate that this almost never occurs. Reasons include:

Attack Helicopters:

- Can be pre-empted due to weather
- Can be unavailable due to maintenance
- Might not arrive at the critical moment

Artillery:

- FASCAM requires careful coordination that is extremely difficult to achieve under field conditions
- Copperhead likewise requires coordination that often fails in a combat environment

In the end result, the cases where supporting assets are available and perform in accordance with the commander’s plan represent less than 10% of the engagements played out at CMTC and JRTC. Basing an entire defensive scheme upon assets that are effective less than 10% of the time is ill-advised at best. Moreover, infantry in doctrinally correct (meaning constricted) terrain should be capable of defeating an armored/mechanized enemy force without the luxury of supporting assets should these assets, for whatever reason, not play a decisive role. Support assets such as FASCAM and attack helicopters should be utilized whenever possible, but the defending infantry should be capable of doing the job without them.

Some would suggest that the answer to the ineffectiveness of the supporting assets in CMTC and JRTC is simply better training and more practice. This solution avoids the reality of the situation. The United States already possesses the most sophisticated training centers in the world today. The units exercising at these centers are better equipped and trained than any in the history of the United States.

Despite this, units including airborne and ranger battalions are beaten, and beaten regularly, in their attempts to win utilizing this support dependent tactical doctrine. Furthermore, going into detail regarding the specific reasons for the failure of supporting assets in each case again misses the fundamental reality: These tactics have been attempted on numerous occasions by the best light infantry units in the world, and the result is defeat in over 90% of the engagements. If a solution to the failure of these tactics exists, these elite units have not found it.

SOLUTIONS

In formulating a solution that does not rely on supporting assets, one must bring to bear most or all of the TOWs and other anti-armor systems at the decisive point. Furthermore, efforts should be made to insure that this force engages the enemy from something other than a frontal view. Side or even rear shots are preferable. How? The following are keys to the decisive defeat of the enemy MRB:

1. **Concentrate available anti-armor assets.** This means consolidating the CSC at the battalion level.
2. **Develop a terrain based maneuver scheme that will allow the CSC to move astride the enemy approach route once this route is identified.** Because the vulnerability of the TOW vehicles in combat conditions, care must be taken to ensure that this movement is carefully planned and kept to a minimum.
3. **Execute a massed anti-armor ambush directed against the flank or rear of the enemy main body with the CSC.**

OTHER MEASURES

Use of non-mobile assets to block. Even with the mobility available to the defenders, there will be assets that are largely static. These, along with maximum engineer and artillery support, are the blocking forces. This means higher risk for these elements, but the result is that when the anti-armor assets enter the fray on the enemy flank and rear, the attacker is engaged by 90% of the defender's assets, rather than 10-15%.

Development of an effective obstacle plan. While the importance of a detailed obstacle plan is an accepted idea, the obstacles must be developed in such a way that supports the maneuver-based anti-armor ambush. Utilized in conjunction with the non-mobile assets just described, obstacles can help to fix the enemy, providing the CSC with the maximum potential for a successful ambush.

BY THE BOOK

If this approach fails to convince the doctrinal "die hard," the following comparison may help. Under the "by the book" approach, the fragmented TOW assets will always be suppressed and destroyed, often without having destroyed a single enemy vehicle. Imagine, even given a frontal engagement, the effectiveness of 20 TOWs fired as a volley. The enemy may suppress 3 or 5 or perhaps even 10, but the result—at least in this scenario—will be the near complete destruction of the tank company if the first

TOW volley. Remember, doing it the old way resulted in 6 tanks destroyed at the cost of nearly all the TOW assets.

The commander who concentrates on developing a blocking/maneuver based approach to achieve a decisive anti-armor ambush of the enemy will be successful, even in the complete absence of supporting assets.

CONCLUSIONS

3/325th ABCT was defeated because, for over four decades, efforts at doctrinal reform have centered on techniques and technology rather than maneuver-based tactical expertise. In a situation analogous to “missing the forest for the trees,” U.S. commanders have become so indoctrinated in the formal “battle development” process that they fail to accomplish the most rudimentary objective: focusing decisive combat power on the enemy Center of Gravity. This failure, together with the over reliance on often undependable support assets, results in a scenario where defending commanders may literally defeat themselves.

Perhaps the most important lesson to take away from this analysis is that this is not an analysis based on a computer model or a high-tech simulation. This is a study rooted in first person observations backed up by comprehensive After Action Reporting data. The results very much speak for themselves. 3/325, with all of the advantages accorded them in 45 years of “development” lost to an enemy considerably less formidable than that facing Task Force Smith, even in absolute terms. The technology employed by the CMTC OPFOR was in many ways very little removed from that facing TF Smith, while technology and training on the U.S. side had advanced by several orders of magnitude since the Korean conflict. What this means is that the fixes, while beneficial, weren’t the right ones. It is much the same as installing new shocks and brakes on one’s car, while failing to overhaul the engine itself. The net result is a car that rides better, but still doesn’t perform well where it counts. Until the U.S. military leadership commits to a doctrinal overhaul that fixes the tactical problems, the popular motto: “No More Task Force Smiths” will continue to ring very hollow indeed.