

# MYTHS FROM THE NTC

## review of new doctrine

by LTC Robert J. Greenwalt, Jr.



The "lessons learned" publications developed by training units and their observers are valuable by-products of the intense and realistic training exercises conducted by the National Training Center.

Unfortunately, some of the new doctrine proves deadly under closer examination. What may work at the Training Center in a perfectly controlled exercise may not occur on the real battle field. Observers and commanders alike should be wary of the quick, the easy, or the obvious reason in analyzing combat situations.

A far better tactic for leaders to use in analyzing these combat exercises is to consider all METT-T factors—mission, enemy, troops, terrain, and time. By thinking through any tactical encounter using these five considerations, we can avoid such common engineer-related "myths" as those shown below.

*MYTH: Fighting positions are always more valuable than antitank ditches. In the defense, engineers should always concentrate on survivability before counter mobility.*

**OBSERVATION:** A dug-in tank is very difficult to hit. Antitank ditches are not good obstacles. Tying antitank ditches into "NO GO" terrain requires dedication of

effort for a long time, yet produces obstacles which can be quickly breached by hand.

**ANALYSIS:** The factors in this situation which you need to analyze in greater detail are enemy (OPFOR) weaponry, NTC terrain, and typical employment of friendly troops.

In a situation peculiar to the weapons simulation at Fort Irwin, shallow positions and small berms prove very effective against the typical enemy armament, MILES lasers. In a real combat situation, these positions would be deathtraps against an enemy armed with kinetic energy penetrators.

The Fort Irwin desert terrain also contributes to the erroneous observation that survivability is the preferred tactic. In the crumbly desert soil, antitank ditches are easily breached with hand tools. The typical obstacle employment usually consists of a single antitank ditch dug perpendicular to the avenue of approach which joins the mountains together.

Hand breaching proves very effective because it's not only impossible to cover lengthy ditches with fires from the defending battle positions, it's difficult to adjust artillery fire in Fort Irwin's map-reading environment. Tactically, it would take less

time to install shorter antitank ditches. Because these could be adequately protected against hand breaching, they would remain effective during any attack.

*MYTH: The most effective use of obstacles is to make long linear "barriers" to tie "NO GO" terrain together.*

**OBSERVATION:** At the NTC, U.S. units on the attack are routinely destroyed by the simple linear obstacles which the OPFOR employs. The troops "pile up" in front of any barrier which ties together "NO GO" terrain where they are easily destroyed by OPFOR defenders.

**ANALYSIS:** The key elements in this scenario are the enemy obstacle techniques and the ability of friendly troops to handle the obstacles.

Contrary to employing actual Soviet tactics, the OPFOR at the NTC installs comparatively simple obstacle systems. They do this because (1) they don't have the normal complement of Soviet obstacle installation equipment, and (2) they don't need better barriers because the Blue Forces can't breach anything the OPFOR builds.

The real problem is that the U.S. combined arms forces consistently fail to reconnoiter the area or perform other preparatory tasks essential to a breaching attempt. Because they are poorly prepared and rehearsed, the Blue Forces are consistently stalled and/or "destroyed" at these simple obstacles. Instead of identifying their own shortcomings, the Blue Force leaders get the impression that simple long, linear barriers are effective against OPFOR. In fact, Soviet forces are highly organized, well-rehearsed and equipped for effective breaching. In actual combat, Soviet forces would take such linear obstacles in stride.

*MYTH: The "dense pack" is the most effective way to employ surface-laid mines. Installing mines close together ensures an enemy tank will strike one, producing the same effect as the vehicle hitting a brick wall.*

**OBSERVATION:** A typical NTC exercise has shallow minefields, seldom more than 20 or 30 inches deep with devices placed two or three meters apart. They work well.

**ANALYSIS:** The minefield mission is the factor in this situation.

Tank "kills" at the NTC depend on an observer/controller (O/C) viewing and assessing tank movement from a distance. Therefore, most units make minefields shallow with high linear densities so an O/C can easily see when a vehicle trips one of the inert mine devices. This exercise situation abrogates the real mission—to emplace an effective minefield. In reality, this type of minefield is easily breached and the closely spaced war-reserve mines may "self-breach" through sympathetic detonation.

*MYTH: Minefields must always include wire entanglements to be an effective obstacle.*

**OBSERVATION:** Minefields by themselves are not only easily breached by dismounted infantry, individual tanks can "pick" their way through them. Installing wire obstacles with minefields ensures the effectiveness of the obstacle and makes breaching more difficult.

**ANALYSIS:** Again, your primary considerations in this situation are the minefield mission, enemy breaching procedures, and friendly troops. At NTC, no safe, effective antipersonnel mine or antihandling device exists for the exercises. All minefields are surface-laid and the mines are painted bright blue to enable controllers to see them. Even when employing such obvious tactics, the limited number of observer/controllers to assess casualties make minefields ineffective against dismounted troops. Furthermore, obstacles are generally not protected by antipersonnel fires because of the poor employment tactics employed. Since the OPFOR do not have actual enemy breaching equipment, they can, under the training center's rules of engagement, simply pick up mines and

move them to the side to make a lane. As a result, at the NTC, the only way to ensure that minefields will slow tanks is to hinder dismounted troop movement using wire. This tactic is based on the soldiers' reluctance to hang up their vehicles on wire.

In reality, surface minefields are composed of O.D. painted mines which are difficult to detect, breach, and are deadly. Buried minefields incorporating antipersonnel mines and antihandling devices are even more so. Both types of minefields

---

### **What may work at the Training Center in a perfectly controlled exercise may not occur on the real battle field.**

---

would be covered by effective anti-tank and antipersonnel fire. Therefore, wire obstacles would be ineffective in actual combat.

*MYTH: Dozers are so important that commanders must designate a "CINC dozer", a maneuver soldier to be in charge of the vehicle. This soldier ensures that the dozers don't run out of fuel, perform at maximum efficiency, etc.*

**OBSERVATION:** Because of the understandable desire to excel in the NTC exercises, few units use only their normal TOE equipment at Fort Irvin. They normally "beef-up" the engineer element with many additional bulldozers. This engineer equipment tends to sit idle before and after a mission. During actual employment, the engineer unit leader generally ignores the vehicle maintenance requirements which results in the dozer breaking down or running out of gas. By having the supported unit provide a "dozer CINC" (the CSM, an assistant S3, or an XO), the equipment gets proper attention from the organization with the most to gain from correct employment.

**ANALYSIS:** The key factor in this situation is the number and organization of available troops.

A key principle of task organization is to match assets against missions, and then add in the necessary command and control elements to make the assets effective. A platoon leader/task force engineer has limited capability to control much more than his organic personnel and equipment. If the leader receives several additional bulldozers, the unit should also be augmented. As a minimum, a supervisory element with an experienced equipment NCO and the necessary materiel to manage an equipment section should accompany the bulldozers. A unit on a detached operation, like an NTC rotation, should also be augmented with a fuel tanker and a maintenance team. By organizing in this manner, the maneuver commander will not only have the necessary technical supervisory expertise, the engineer unit will also gain maximum productivity from the bulldozers.

The "myths" outlined in this report are not designed to diminish the training conducted at the NTC. Observing and analyzing a tactical engagement in order to develop universal principles and doctrine is a very difficult task. The point is, just as the staff officer must use METT-T to devise a tactical plan, trainers and/or observers must analyze these factors to develop effective lessons for future operations. Only then will accurate lessons learned replace the current myths.

*LTC Robert J. Greenwalt Jr., a combat engineer, is currently assigned as Chief, Tactics, Training and Doctrine Division, Department of Combined Arms, U.S. Army Engineer School. Previous assignments include company commander in the 547th, 20th, and 34th Engineer Battalions, S3 and Assistant Division Engineer in the 7th Engineer Battalion, and Commander, 16th Engineer Battalion.*