

The NTC Is...

High-tech, realistic, intensive, demanding, and *effective*.

A handful of adjectives. Yet descriptively, they barely scratch the surface of the 1,000 square miles of desert which is the stage for a training facility unique in the world—the US Army's National Training Center (NTC), located halfway between Los Angeles and Las Vegas at Fort Irwin, California.

The NTC and its 3,800 active duty soldiers and 2,500 civilian employees provide tough, realistic combined arms training at battalion task force level using both live fire and opposing forces. It is at the battalion task force level that planning and execution converge. Data collected from this training helps commanders to objectively evaluate their unit's performance. Over time, this data also will help the Army evaluate and improve training, tactics, doctrine, organizations, and weapons systems, and better correlate resources.

Since its creation in 1980, more than 195,000 soldiers, 55,000 NCOs, and 12,000 officers have received this select training.

Heavy brigades of US Army Forces Command (FORSCOM) rotate to the NTC tailored for combat—an armored and mechanized infantry battalion task force supported by artillery, air defense, engineers, aviation, combat service support units, and the brigade headquarters.

Major fighting systems—tanks and armored personnel carriers—are provided to units by the NTC. The rest of the brigade's equipment and rolling stock is transported from home station. Over 1,100 vehicles and 3,500 soldiers travel to Fort Irwin for each rotation. The brigade, with all its supporting arms, provides the necessary backdrop to focus on battalion task force training and evaluation.

Battalion-sized armor and mechanized units (BLUFOR) are challenged for 14 days and nights at the NTC where they are confronted by appropriately sized opposing forces (OPFOR) trained in Soviet tactics.

Both sides—the OPFOR and the visiting BLUFOR—want to win when they face one another. And both do.

The OPFOR normally wins four out of five rotations, but for a number of reasons. They outnumber (according to appropriate Soviet doctrine force ratios) BLUFOR 3 to 1—they know the terrain like the back of their hand—they do the same things over and over.

As one OPFOR officer said, "That's why we're so damn good. We're probably better than most Soviet units BLUFOR might ever encounter. We want to win, but when BLUFOR wins, we're still happy because we know they've learned something. Even when they lose, they win, because of the knowledge and experience they take home with them."

The NTC meets the requirements to convert the tactical plan into action. As GEN John A. Wickham, Jr., Army Chief of Staff says, "Modern weapon systems are often highly complex and diverse. These weapons have changed the tempo, lethality, and spread of battle. Land which was once ample for training entire divisions is today scarcely adequate for training brigades and, in some cases, battalions."

Historically, commanders have had to lead their units into combat without the opportunity to train in task force formations, resulting in lives lost and equipment destroyed. At the NTC battalion commanders deploy their troops in task force formations, learn the hard lessons of war, and do so without the harsh training of actual combat.

The thorough, demanding training

provided by the NTC prepares both individuals and units to fight effectively.

Although the NTC simulates combat, what soldiers go through on a typical rotation is anything but a game. Most soldiers going to the NTC face for the first time many of the elements of stress inherent in combat. They fight hard battles day and night, in a desert arena which features temperatures as high as 130° Fahrenheit, or well below zero, dirt and dust, tear gas, smoke, and simulated chemical attacks.

Soldiers must evacuate the "wounded," remove damaged vehicles, requisition new personnel and equipment. If they lose food, they go hungry. If they misplace their gas masks, they are gassed.

They learn the limits of their minds and bodies. They learn the durability of their equipment. They learn not to repeat mistakes. They grow in competence and confidence. And they emerge harder, tougher, and smarter than when they started.