

Why the OPFOR Wins

by Captain John A. Nagl

Most of us know the feeling all too well. After forty-eight hours of continuous preparation — siting and emplacing obstacles, digging in tanks and Bradleys, setting up TRPs and noting their locations on range cards, OPORDERS, rehearsals, backbriefs, walking the ground from the enemy's viewpoint — after all of that, thousands of man-hours of preparation sunk into a deliberate defense, the OPFOR pours through you like you weren't even there. Most of the BMPs and T-80s don't even bother to turn their turrets toward your blinking tank, dead in the artillery prep, as the hated red horde rolls by in march formation.

I am fortunate enough to have enjoyed the experience of being embarrassed by the OPFOR at the Army's two premier mounted training centers, the National Training Center in California and the Combat Maneuver Training Center in Germany. Hot and wet at one and cold and wet at the other, the common feature of both training centers (besides the rain) is the presence of a dedicated, professional, full-time opposing force, trained in Soviet tactics and equipped with mock-ups of Soviet fighting vehicles. Like most of those who suffered through a motorized rifle regiment on the attack, I wondered why the OPFOR consistently kicked my tail.

I recently was given the chance to discover at least part of the answer. The CMTC's OPFOR, 1-4 Infantry, is not provided with dismounts for its BMPs by MTOE; units in Europe are tasked to provide soldiers to serve as dismounts and replicate the actual Soviet threat, which would include a squad of infantry in every BMP. My soldiers and I put on the black uniforms of the enemy for two weeks in September and served as Soviet infantry while two armor-heavy task forces fought in the box at Hohenfels. I rode with MRB commanders during MRR attacks and forward detachment missions and fought MRC defenses side by side with the MRC commander. And I learned why the OPFOR wins.



Although a few of the things I learned may be specific to 1-4 Infantry and fighting at CMTC, most are equally applicable to the NTC. This is not intended to be a primer on "How to Beat the OPFOR," although knowing the enemy is an important requirement for success on any battlefield. Even more important than knowing the enemy is knowing your own unit's strengths and weaknesses. Most of the things 1-4 is good at are skills in which BLUEFOR units need to improve.

Like most of us, before I fought with the OPFOR, I thought that they cheated. The other big advantage of the OPFOR, I was convinced, was its MILES equipment. The OPFOR used special boresighting equipment and custom-mounted transmitters to defeat the BLUEFOR. So I thought. I was wrong.

The OPFOR does not cheat. Bumper numbers reported as cheaters by the BLUEFOR receive Article 15s from the OPFOR battalion commander. During my rotation, an OPFOR BMP commander threw a smoke grenade after being killed ("trained" in the OPFOR's jargon). He was in the battalion commander's office, with his platoon leader and company commander, two hours after the mission. He did not enjoy the experience.

Although individual cases of cheating do occur, I do not believe that they are more prevalent in the OPFOR than in

the BLUEFOR. Soldiers on both sides want to win and push hard against the rules, but the OPFOR as a whole is less tolerant of MILES cheating than the BLUEFOR units with which I have fought. In addition, MILES II has made it much harder to cheat without discovery.

The OPFOR's MILES equipment is no better than that rotating units draw from the MILES warehouse. T-80s use the same transmitters that rotating units put into their tanks and don't even confirm their boresights before a mission. Lining up the crosshairs on the corner of the motor pool is good enough. "BMP guns" are not stabilized, have no optics other than a three-power telescope, and have no night-sight ability whatsoever. The OPFOR definitely doesn't win because of its special MILES equipment nor because of any extreme care it takes in boresighting.

I believe there are a number of reasons why the OPFOR consistently wins. These include the home court factor, the OPFOR orders process, OPFOR tactics, use of engineers and artillery, and use of reconnaissance assets. Dealing with each in turn:

THE HOME COURT FACTOR: The OPFOR knows the ground like the back of its hand. At CMTC, any PFC driver who has been assigned to 1-4 Infantry more than a month knows the

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routes through the box by heart. At the start of a mission, the vehicle commander tells the driver the checkpoints through which to drive: "50 to 13 to 17 to 37 to 24." He doesn't talk with the driver for the rest of the mission. Every vehicle knows the best places to fight from, where the enemy is likely to be, where to throw smoke grenades to cover movement through open areas. Nobody gets misoriented, confused, or lost. This is probably the OPFOR's single greatest advantage.

It is, however, not an unrealistic advantage. The chances that an enemy of the United States will invade Blackwell Range at Fort Hood or Range 301 at Grafenwohr are pretty slim. We almost certainly will fight enemies on their home turf. They'll know the good hiding places, defilade positions, and roadblocks. We won't. The OPFOR thus has a realistic advantage in its knowledge of the terrain.

THE ORDERS PROCESS: The OPFOR doesn't have an orders process for the offense. It waits until its recon elements tell it where the enemy is, then decides which routes to use in the attack. Routes can be changed even after LD because everyone knows all of the routes; FRAGO's are issued over the nets using checkpoints.

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They've done this before, more than once. They know the ground. They don't need a rehearsal; last week, when they ran the same mission, was their rehearsal.

OPFOR TACTICS: Offensive tactics are simple: Remain in march formation along high-speed routes until contact is expected. Deploy aggressively and rapidly using well-rehearsed battle drills, massed direct and indirect fires, and shock effect to destroy the enemy. Return to march formation and drive on through. If a small pocket of BLUEFOR retains combat power and cannot be defeated quickly, place a "BLOCK" with a small element of your lead element taking up a hasty defense; following elements will remain in column.

THE OPFOR is more interested in destroying your battalion aid station than in killing every tank; if it destroys your ability to reconstitute, it already has won the next mission. The OPFOR is no longer allowed to destroy TOCs; BLUEFOR forces fall apart and are unable to perform the next mission if their TOC is destroyed.

OPFOR DEFENSIVE TACTICS are remarkably similar to BLUEFOR with the exception of OPFOR use of engineers and artillery. The engineers themselves are not better at their jobs than BLUEFOR engineers; OPFOR engineers are augmentees, borrowed for the rotation from engineer units throughout Europe. The OPFOR just uses its engineers much more effectively than do most rotating units. All available engineer effort is focused on one defending company at a time, rather than being piecemealed throughout the defense. All obstacles are personally sited by the OPFOR fire support officer, who registers the location of every obstacle with indirect fires.

For most defenses, there is no specific fire support overlay; the obstacle overlay serves for both. Forces defending an obstacle merely request fires on "Obstacle F." No shift missions are fired; every fire mission is "Fire for Effect Grid," and artillery fires are as focused as the engineer effort is. Probably most importantly, every obstacle and every choke point is under continuous observation by dedicated redundant observers employed in depth.

The defense is probably the place where the OPFOR has the most to teach BLUEFOR units. It does exactly what BLUEFOR units are trying to do when they defend, but the OPFOR does it much, much better. Rarely do more than a few BLUEFOR tanks trickle into the main engagement area of an MRC defense; the vast majority die to indirect fires at obstacles, merely trying to find the main defensive belt.

USE OF RECON ASSETS: The OPFOR's reconnaissance assets are probably its second-greatest advantage over the BLUEFOR. On offensive missions, divisional and regimental recon deploy early and almost invariably manage to travel completely through the BLUEFOR counterreconnaissance screen and main defensive belt undetected, while

getting six-digit grids to individual vehicle fighting positions. Knowing where the enemy plans to fight from is essential to his defeat; on one movement to contact in which I participated, the OPFOR was not allowed to LD its divisional and regimental recon prior to a mission because of ammunition problems affecting both BLUEFOR and OPFOR. The BLUEFOR fought the OPFOR to a draw, the best BLUEFOR results in any mission I observed. The OPFOR gets more intelligence from its reconnaissance assets and disseminates the intelligence more effectively than do BLUEFOR units.

On defensive missions, the OPFOR has its scouts, both mounted and dismounted, overwatch choke points to the forward edge of its Limit of Advance. They call in artillery, track the advancing BLUEFOR units, and destroy follow-on logistics elements with antitank weapons.

How To Beat the OPFOR

If all of these natural advantages make the OPFOR sound like a formidable enemy, they should. 1-4 Infantry is a capable combat unit, well trained and equipped for the sole purpose of providing your unit the most capable opponent you will ever face. The Combat Training Centers are designed to be harder than combat, to stress your unit to the greatest degree possible without actually putting rounds in the air. The OPFOR at CMTC has a motto: "You have two options when you fight the OPFOR: you can be defeated, or you can be humiliated." This is probably a good thing. If the OPFOR was easy to defeat, the training centers would not serve their purpose.

How to Win at CMTC and NTC

"Winning" at the Maneuver Training Centers is not synonymous with defeating the OPFOR, which, when all is said and done, is merely a capable training aid. "Winning" at the Maneuver Training Centers is actually training safely and well, improving command and control, orders drills, medevac procedures, basic soldier skills. I believe that by focusing on defeating the OPFOR, BLUEFOR forces lose sight of

what they are trying to accomplish while working through a rotation. The emphasis should not be exclusively on making MILES lights blink, but also should focus on improving weaknesses and sustaining strengths of the BLUEFOR unit.

This is certainly how the OPFOR measures the ability of its opponents. The OPFOR always wins the battles, but afterwards, it speaks of its opponents differently. Units that don't suffer injuries during the rotation, that take care of their soldiers despite the demands of simulated combat, that ask questions and learn during their AARs, and that improve throughout the rotation — these are units that the OPFOR speaks of respectfully after a rotation.

I didn't learn any secrets about how to defeat the OPFOR during the two rotations I spent fighting with them; the next time I face a motorized rifle regiment on the attack, I fully expect to be blinking. I hope that because of my experience, I will use my scouts, artillery, and obstacles more effectively. I will certainly do my best to take as many of them down with me as I can. While the T-80s and BMPs roll by, I will do my best to remember: Their job is to train my unit, under the most rigorous possible conditions short of war, to fight the next war outnumbered and to win.

The author would like to thank the officers and soldiers of 1-4 Infantry, who earn their motto every day: "Warriors!"

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