

MAKING KILLERS



Imperatives for Tank Lane Training

by Lieutenant Colonel James C. Crowley (Retired)

Winning or losing heavy force battles normally depends on the fighting proficiency of tank crews. You need “killers” to win. The fundamental standards are simple and direct — be able to kill and survive.

I have had the opportunity to observe many killer tank crews, but will cite one example — the crew of D-22 — in a defense of the Washboard at the NTC during 1986. The OPFOR had achieved what looked like a breakthrough with two reduced strength motorized rifle battalions (MRB), and I was working my way around to follow this penetration. The terrain was very broken, and it took a few minutes to move to a good position to observe and follow the closest MRB.

When I arrived, I found a graveyard of blinking lights. A call to the Tactical Analysis Facility at the Star Wars building revealed that one tank, D-22, had accomplished this destruction. I next saw a lone M60A3 moving quickly down a wadi, intermittently moving up to hull-down position for a quick look and then back to full cover for continued movement. D-22 was stalking the second MRB, a quest stopped short by a change of mission.

On the surface, this crew was not unusual. They had gone through the same training program as the rest of the battalion. Only the driver had been to the NTC previously. The tank commander had been in the battalion less than a

year, having had a previous recruiting tour. But this crew was special. They could shoot, use terrain, and had a tactical sense for the battlefield to a level that made them superstars.

Being a killer is far more than a matter of knowing and being able to do the tasks outlined in various Soldier's Manuals, gunnery manuals, MTPs, and drill books. Enemy acquisition, use of terrain, and target engagement must be done quickly and very well. “Well” means being better than your enemy. An analogy to boxing is appropriate here. To win, the boxer must not only have the basic skills, but he must be quicker, stronger, and have better technique than his opponent. He must be able to find and take advantage of any weakness in his opponent. Even after basic skills are second nature, endless hours of practice are spent conditioning and training to make minor improvements, because the difference between losing and winning is so small.

Based on observation and discussion with many successful tank crews at the NTC, I wrote an article for *ARMOR* outlining some of their tactics, techniques, and procedures.¹ While I feel that this article reasonably outlined many important tank fighting skills, it did not adequately address the equally important issue of training those skills. Since then, observation of numerous training events and discussions with leaders with far more experience than mine has only strengthened the hy-

pothesis that crew proficiency is fundamental to winning battles. They have also convinced me that, while there are natural superstars, good training can develop more of them, greatly improve the average, and eliminate the tank crews that are merely targets. The key ingredient is a direct focus on developing crew fighting skills that is frequently missing from training exercises.

This article outlines some insights as “imperatives” for training tank crews through effective platoon lanes training. None of the ideas in this article are original.² All are based on extensive observations of unit training, study, and discussions with many leaders about what works and what doesn't. Although all are being practiced in the Army today, they are often absent. Their absence marks the difference between truly effective training and training which looks and is somewhat effective, but which could be much better.

This discussion of lanes events does not mean that lanes are the only component of a program to train battle-competent tank crews. Certainly the tank gunnery tables and the gunnery programs outlined in the FM 17-12 series are essential. Another type of crew training with proven merit includes direct crew training events like “King of the Hill”-type exercises where individual crews or sections directly develop “dogfighting” skills in low cost, low preparation training events. Such

events are especially beneficial in that they allow a high number of repetitions in a limited amount of time with small OPTEMPO and preparation costs.

Lane Imperatives

Focus on training crews during platoon lanes. A central precept is that platoon lanes concentrate at least as much on training crews as the aggregate platoon. Although the concept of multi-echelon training is accepted, in practice most platoon lanes are aimed mainly at the platoon and tend to focus on platoon leader planning and platoon leader decisions. Platoon lanes should focus on full crew proficiency and a limited set of platoon tasks and skills needed for continued training in higher level events. Most platoon tasks can only be truly trained to standard during company-level training exercises that focus on training platoons in a more realistic environment.

This focus on crew training during platoon lanes makes a big difference in the way a lane is planned, resourced, and executed. The most obvious difference is in the trainer or O/C package. One O/C can track the platoon, but to observe effective use of terrain, maintenance of security, and other important crew actions requires at least a second O/C and assistance from the perspective of the OPFOR. The remainder of the imperatives in this article support achieving this central precept.

Design and conduct platoon lanes to train killing, surviving, reporting, and sustaining. This is a small expansion of "Move, Shoot, and Communicate." In the most basic terms, tank platoons contribute to larger organizations, winning battles and engagements by being at the right places on the battlefield at the right times. They exert their influence by killing the enemy and reporting critical information.

I use the word "killing" rather than "shooting" deliberately. To kill you must be able to shoot accurately and quickly, but shooting skills alone are not enough. Killing requires acquisition, which in turn requires constant surveillance, a sense for terrain, and the ability to anticipate enemy dispositions and actions to focus these efforts. It also requires that the platoon leader

have the skills to control and distribute fires.

Survival is as necessary as being able to kill; in fact, it is a prerequisite. A tank that can survive will do its share of killing, which is a reason to stress battle patience. Selection of routes and positions to provide for the best possible cover and concealment, use of appropriate rates of movement, earliest possible acquisition of the enemy, as well as killing him before he can kill you, all contribute to survival.

To survive, all-around security must be constant. While the concept of all-around security is easy to understand, developing the teamwork and crew skills to constantly maintain full battlefield surveillance and awareness requires structured practice, discipline, and tactical sense. A clear example is "target fixation," where the crew is so intent on an enemy target to the front that an offset enemy engaging them is unnoticed until too late.

We must stress survival because the objective of training is preparation for war. Soldiers must be confident of their ability to survive a conflict, and training events must create that confidence by building survival skills.

Sustainment activities, including maintenance, supply, and preventive medicine, are necessary to effectively enter and continue the fight. Moreover, training must develop the self-discipline to perform this function continuously and automatically, regardless of circumstance. Reporting refers to the requirement of continuously keeping the boss, subordinates, and other members of the team informed of the enemy situation, the platoon's status, necessary support requirements, and any other important information in a timely manner.

Like the battlefield operating system functions, these functions must be continuously performed during combat operations. Platoon training exercises should have developing this level of performance as a primary objective, regardless of the specific MTP tasks being trained. These functions are necessary complements of current MTP because they are critical but not sufficiently highlighted in its current set of tasks.

Every platoon AAR should concentrate on these functions and their im-

provement, as well as the specific ARTEP-MTP tasks and drills included in the exercise. Standards are not met with an absolute "GO" or "NO GO" criteria, but by being as good as possible.³ Each killed tank crew should be asked:

"Did the platoon accomplish its mission and meet the commander's intent?"

"Could we have done better?"

"How?"

"Why did you die?"

"What could have been done to avoid getting killed?"

The chain of command conducts lanes. There are several reasons why the most important imperative is active, direct conduct of lanes by the chain of command.⁴ First, effective training requires experienced, expert trainers. The most experienced platoon leader in the company is the company commander, and the most experienced soldier in the company is the first sergeant. Participation of the company commander and ISG also develops effective communications and operating procedures between the company commander and his platoons — from orders development through reorganization and consolidation actions following an engagement. Additionally, participation of the company team command group and trains (commander, ISG, XO, FSO, with medical and maintenance support elements) performing their C2 and sustainment roles during platoon lanes provides platoons realistic training on a full range of fighting, sustaining, and reporting tasks. Participation of the company command group and trains from a tactical configuration is excellent preparation for their company-level operations. For these reasons, tactical road marches, assembly area, and preparation for combat activities should be conducted at company-level during platoon lanes training periods.

However, the main reason why active participation by the battalion and company chain of command is important is that this is a clear signal that tactical proficiency is important.

Planning lanes training to allow commander participation requires effort. To be conducted correctly, lanes require extensive preparation and support, and

platoon lanes are normally planned, prepared, and conducted as a battalion- or even brigade-level effort. During a platoon lanes training period, several different lanes are normally conducted to train a complete set of tasks and drills, with platoons rotating between lanes. Planning the rotation of company commanders and first sergeants to be the primary trainers on each lane can be difficult. However, this is critically important, and should never be left out, even if it increases the time needed to conduct the set of lanes.

Use of the “lanes meister” concept can help overcome this scheduling issue. The “lanes meister” is a battalion officer with the responsibility to plan, set up, and conduct the lane. He controls the OPFOR, additional observer controllers, and support personnel. Close cooperation and preparation effort between the “lanes meister” and company commanders and first sergeants is required, given the different set of preparation and execution responsibilities. It’s important to hold a joint rehearsal of all trainers to finalize exact responsibilities and procedures.

The best example I have seen of this emphasis on chain of command involvement was the OPFOR “Spear Stakes,” conducted during 1995.⁵ The lanes were set up at brigade level and observed by the brigade commander and S3. The “lane meister” was the assistant battalion S3. These platoon-level AARs were conducted by the battalion commander or S3, and the company commander. The chain of command’s priority on developing the warfighting skills of subordinates was clear.

Plan and prepare to conduct and watch the exercise effectively. An effective training event requires the same type and level of planning and preparation as a deliberate tactical operation. The terrain on which the lane is set up, the tactical situation, and enemy positioning must force platoons to practice all-round acquisition and allow use of terrain for cover and concealment. You want to create a training situation where training weaknesses result in obvious performance shortfalls — dying, failing to kill the enemy, or not accomplishing assigned tasks. The battalion commander, staff, and CSM play a critical part in these preparations. Their breadth of tactical experience ensures adequate preparation. The effectiveness

of lane preparation is more a function of quality than quantity.

Trainer and OPFOR preparation includes reconnaissance of the terrain, detailed instructions to each trainer and the OPFOR, terrain walks, brief-backs, and rehearsals. Planning and preparation to watch the engagement and collect data for the AAR is particularly important. It is too late to put together the events for an AAR after the exercise is completed, if key pieces have not been collected beforehand. Similar to the tactical IPB process, needed information requirements should be identified, specific observation and collection responsibilities assigned, and recording procedures established. Often, it is better to use enemy OPs rather than have all O/Cs accompany platoons. As an example, during the occupation of a battle position, an OP viewing the battle position from the enemy’s direction could determine if the occupation was accomplished with minimum exposure far better than an O/C watching from the friendly side.⁶

Trainers must know the OPFOR plan and dispositions, as well as that of the platoon. During planning and rehearsals, trainers predict the exercise flow and identify specific observation requirements, with emphasis on survival, killing, and mission accomplishment. For example, the senior O/C should determine when the platoon should first be able to detect the OPFOR and make sure all the trainers, including the OPFOR controller, are looking to see how long detection and reaction actually take, which tanks should have been able to detect the OPFOR and, if not adequately accomplished, how this performance could be improved. During the event, the first trainer who sees that the platoon could detect the OPFOR should announce this over the controller net.

After the platoon’s OPORD and rehearsal, the trainers should do an internal debrief and refine the observation and control plan.

A net control station (NCS) should be set up to monitor company, platoon, OPFOR, and trainer control nets. The net control station plays the fire direction net, if the company SOP calls for platoons to call for fire over this type net. It also directs fire marker actions if they are included in the lane. The net

control station tracks the battle, monitors and records OPFOR and friendly events, the information exchanged within the platoon, and the platoon’s reports. If possible, the net control station should be set up on an OP to observe the lane, as well as monitor radio traffic. An experienced NCO running the NCS is invaluable in assisting the senior trainer prepare for the AAR.

Trainers, OPFOR, and the NCS must be sufficiently sized and prepared to record details of the battle for the AAR. Because emphasis will be on killing and survival, an annotated “killer-victim scoreboard” is important. This means being able to record each killing event with a killer, time, and locations of killer and victim. Although most of the times the crews will know this information, for the events over which there is confusion, it is particularly important to have this data.

Trainers and OPFOR controllers must ensure a fair fight. That requires a knowledge of how to check MILES to ensure it is operational and that sensors are cleaned and not covered by camouflage or improper use of fighting positions. Rules of engagement must be defined, understood, and enforced. Much effort has gone into the rules of engagement used at the CTCs, which should be the basis for those used during home station lanes.

After execution, the chief lane trainer prepares for the AAR with a debriefing of his training team, to reconstruct what happened and why, and to ensure he has identified the key points that should be brought out during the AAR. The focus should be on the bottom line — tasks and critical sub-task standards and the tactical functions, especially killing and survival. Who died and how could it have been avoided? Who didn’t engage, but could and should have? Who engaged but didn’t hit?⁷

Repeat execution until high skill levels — not just understanding — are obtained and ingrained. Although the need to “train to standard and not to time” is universally accepted, in practice there is a tendency to underestimate the impact of frictions that always accompany training and allocate too little time. This often means only one execution run. It is repetition of the execution phase that builds crew proficiency — again, this is like sparring for

the boxer. When planning lane timelines, three or four execution runs with an AAR should be the target. Although the amount of time required for lane varies by the unit's proficiency and specific tasks contained, two days per platoon per lane is a good starting point for planning. If the platoon reaches standards quickly, it is easy to increase lane difficulty; for example, adding a persistent agent event to the exercise.

When repeating execution, always put in a sufficient change in METT-T to provide for actual practice of tactical skills, rather than merely refighting the last engagement. The objective is not to learn to deal with a specific situation but to perform functions and tasks well in a variety of situations.

Train a tactical event — not an entire operation; but train all the tasks in that event. Too often, platoons are given company-type missions, particularly for offensive tasks. Platoons normally perform tasks, (overwatch, assault, breach, etc.) as a part of a company scheme of maneuver. Lanes should be set up to train a narrow set of tactical tasks and the functions of killing, surviving, reporting, and sustaining in a limited scope training event.

Even though the platoon lane should train a single tactical event, all the tasks required during combat should be identified by the trainer and included as training objectives. Timely reporting, complete pre-combat checks, crosstalk with other platoons, casualty evacuation and reporting, reaction to indirect fires, and the full range of reorganization and consolidation activities are often left out of training events. This results in negative training, in that the platoon is practicing without performing to the real combat standard. This does not properly prepare the platoon because, when forced to perform realistically with the full set of requirements, something drops. When all required tasks are consistently practiced during training, they become automatic.

Crawl and walk to prepare for running. To focus on platoon collective tasks and crew proficiency, leader and soldier training must be done first. A review of principles, tactics, and procedures, including a detailed discussion of the tactics of execution — such as use of terrain, likely enemy disposi-

tions and actions, appropriate reactions, and the benefits of alternative actions — should be a part of this preparation.

The platoon leader validates his order before giving it to the platoon. Incompleteness in the order, a flawed concept, or other planning mistakes that would preclude success, should be addressed before the platoon leader issues the order. While the platoon leader may learn by seeing his flawed plan fail during execution, the platoon will not learn.⁸

Likewise, critical soldier tasks and training, such as operation of a mine plow before a breach exercise, should be trained and validated beforehand. An item that must be validated is MILES maintenance and proficiency. This type of preparation training can be successfully done, either in garrison just prior to the lane, or as a part of the field lane. However, activities that should be normal preparations for combat operations, such as briefbacks, PMCS, pre-fire checks, rehearsals, and pre-combat inspections should be part of the field lane. These are structured training events with the same emphasis as tactical tasks. These are not done just to make the run phase successful, but to train time management, how to do these events properly, and to reinforce that these are routinely done during combat. As with the order, leaders are checked before conducting these activities and these events may have their own AAR and retraining if not done to standard.

We must stress platoon rehearsals. Failing to rehearse when it is possible and appropriate is a common problem. The OPORD can specify activities to be rehearsed. One example could be rehearsing going to MOPP4 if the enemy situation is one where use of chemical agents is expected. At the same time, reconnaissance and rehearsal activities should be tactically realistic. Rehearsals on the actual terrain on which the lane will be executed defeats the training goal, because this teaches a solution to a specific piece of terrain, rather than training how to apply tactical skills. Reduced scale rehearsals, or rehearsals on similar terrain, are appropriate, just as they would be in an actual tactical situation.

Ensure a competent OPFOR. An OPFOR that cannot destroy exposed

BLUEFOR vehicles, that does not use terrain effectively, or that attacks by rote, using the obvious scheme, will not stress the BLUEFOR to truly learn fighting skills. This means negative learning and false confidence. The OPFOR at the NTC has been criticized by some for being too good, but the competency of the OPFOR, more than any other factor, was the reason for the revolutionary improvement in heavy force tactical competence in the 1980s. In the same way, OPFOR proficiency is critical to effective platoon training exercises.

While the OPFOR element can receive valuable training, its purpose is to train the BLUEFOR. The "lanemeister" must ensure that the OPFOR is thoroughly prepared, that their tactical dispositions are sound, and that OPFOR mistakes do not compromise the training. This includes backbriefs, rehearsals, and pre-combat inspections.

An experienced controller should be assigned to the OPFOR to work with the senior trainer to ensure an effective plan and preparation, to enforce rules of engagement, and to observe and record the events in the exercise. He should have specific observation tasks and responsibilities. The OPFOR and their controller take part in trainer rehearsals, and he and the OPFOR are debriefed to prepare for the AAR.

Make the OPFOR an active participant in AARs. Unfortunately, the majority of platoon AARs I have observed do not include the OPFOR. This is unfortunate because the best AARs I have seen included extensive discussions between the OPFOR and BLUEFOR about what each did right and wrong, and what the effect was for both. For example, "Your tank came right around the one I hit first, and it was an easy shot. You should have moved along a different route." Such interactions allow leaders and soldiers to put themselves in the enemy's position and to think of the problem as one of beating an intelligent enemy, rather than fighting against an unthinking template.

Final Thoughts

The reason for this article is a belief that planning, preparing, and executing training events need better coverage in current training doctrine.⁹ Conducting

effective, efficient training events is difficult but critical in today's turbulent, constrained training environment. There is a constant requirement to develop leaders and maintain ready units. Most platoon training events I have observed have been generally effective, but most could have been better. Maximum benefit must be made out of each field training event, and a more standardized approach emphasizing killing and surviving, the essential fighting skills at crew and platoon level, is necessary to support this objective.

This article does not present a complete discussion of lanes training. It does present some ideas, based on a reasonably extensive set of observations, about how training can be made more effective. Coupled with other discussion and dialogue, I hope that these ideas can add to the process of improving an important training area.

Moreover, I believe that this approach is important in training all echelons. While some leaders have an instinct for fighting, a direct focus on protecting the force and on beating your opponent during training can develop a greater tactical sense in all leaders, one which will stand them in good stead regardless of future METT-T, echelon, or grade. Training can too easily focus at the form and procedures level (checklists) rather than on the winning and developing winners level. Future conflicts will occur, and each engagement will be unique. While procedures and even specific tactics needed to win change with METT-T, the leader's tactical sense, instincts, and passion to win transcend METT-T. Effective training can develop these skills and traits.

Notes

¹"Killer Tank Crews," *ARMOR*, September-October 1984.

²The ideas included in this article have been borrowed from many such leaders. They include but are not limited to: Lieutenant Generals F.J. Brown and Wes Clark; Brigadier General Rusty Casey; Colonels Bill Janes, Tom Grainey, Larry Word, Mac Johnson, Fred Dibella, Pat Lamar, Terry Tucker and the late Will Densberger; Lieutenant Colonels Tony Cerrie, Chris Bagget, and Tom Wilson; Captains Brad Booth, Wil Grimsley, and Tom Kelley; and Tom Lippiatt. Providing direct input to this article were General Edwin Burba; Colonels Don



Appler, Bob Jordan, and Lee Barnes; Lieutenant Colonel Joe Moore; and Dr. Marty Goldsmith.

³For example, the task of "Assault an Enemy Position" in the tank platoon's ARTEP 17-237-10-MTP has a task standard of losing no more than one tank. While a useful beginning benchmark, depending on METT-T, this may or may not mark a desirable level of survival proficiency. If that one tank was killed because of an avoidable mistake, improvement is necessary.

⁴"Make commanders the primary trainers" is also a principle of training in FM 25-100 and 25-101. However, the battalion and squad exercise examples in Chapter 4 of FM 25-101 dilute this principle. They show counterpart and self-training rather than the chain of command setting up and conducting training for their subordinates. Training an organization requires active effort of the chain of command. The platoon leader is responsible for training his platoon, but the company and battalion commander are also responsible. If anything, the primary responsibility is with the higher commander to train his subordinate organizations and leaders.

⁵These platoon lanes were actually Reinforced Motorized Rifle Company (MRC(+)) lanes. An OPFOR MRC(+) is composed of a tank platoon and a mech infantry platoon (3 BMPs), with one platoon leader acting as MRC commander and the other as his deputy. For clarity, I have called these platoon lanes.

⁶This is also an example of MTPs not always directly emphasizing survival skills. The task "Conduct Hasty Occupation of a Battle Position" does not have direct standards of avoiding exposure during the occupation. Yet the conditions are of likely enemy contact.

⁷These and the other AAR techniques outlined in TC 25-20, "A Leader's Guide To After-Action Reviews," are sound but not always fully applied.

⁸For an excellent discussion of this point and others, see "Training in a Low Budget Environment" by Majors Armor D. Brown, Clarence E. Taylor, and Robert R. Leonard in *ARMOR*, July-August 1995. Incidentally, a key point that these authors brought out was that the training program they described did not, but should have, included platoon lanes.

⁹Based on review of FM 25-101, "Battle-Focused Training;" ARTEP 17-237-10-MTP, "Mission Training Plan for the Tank Platoon;" and TC 25-20, "A Leader's Guide to After-Action Reviews."

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