

**N C O** 

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## **The Defense of Duffer's Drift Brigade Support Area**

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by

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Sergeants William Baucom and Rodney Weathers,  
and Sergeant (Promotable) Louise Chee  
(Edited by Captain Steve Lewis)

### **Introduction**

*The Defense of Duffer's Drift* is a fictional work, written in 1907 by British Army Major General Sir Ernest D. Swinton, that has become a classic of military training literature. The story takes place in South Africa between 1899 and 1902, during the war between Great Britain and the "Boers" or Dutch settlers. The story is of Lieutenant Backsite Forethought, who is given responsibility to secure a "drift" or low area on a river where it is possible to cross. He is charged with defending the drift and not allowing any enemy to cross or take the drift. His resources include a company of fifty soldiers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) with individual weapons and some axes, picks and shovels. After Lieutenant Forethought begins thinking about his defensive plan, he falls asleep and has several sequential dreams in which the enemy attacks and defeats his company. Each chapter is a dream in which a battle takes place. The lieutenant learns several lessons in each dream and then applies them to the next dream. On awaking, he uses his new knowledge to successfully achieve his mission.

The purpose of this article is to discuss the correlation between the defensive preparations made in the *The Defense Of Duffer's Drift* and the actual defensive preparation made by a supply company of a forward support battalion during field training or in a combat situation. The goal is to help units inside the Brigade Support Area (BSA) to develop a more effective defense. Specifically, this is a result of several professional development assignments undertaken by the NCOs of the supply platoon of Alpha Company, 101<sup>st</sup> Forward Support Battalion (FSB). Each NCO took a different chapter and presented a report to the platoon on the events of that chapter. The section developed by each NCO comprises story (what happened in that chapter), observations (the NCO's comments on the actions taken by the characters and their possible relation to events each NCO has experienced), and recommendations (the actions the platoon has taken or plans to take to solve these problems). Additionally, there are questions that each defender should ask himself or herself.

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## Chapter One

### SSG Reginald Scott (77F30, Petroleum Supply Specialist)

**Story:** In the first chapter, Lieutenant Forethought arrives at the area to be defended. It is a ford or shallow area of a river, which can be easily crossed by soldiers and horses with equipment. Lieutenant Forethought has no defense plan and no real idea of how to defend his area. He has several experienced noncommissioned officers with him, but he does not ask for or make use of their advice. He allows some local inhabitants to enter his camp to sell food. He has the equipment unloaded and lets the soldiers go to sleep. He posts two guards and allows them to build bonfires that serve to silhouette their location. After he has assigned the guards to their areas of responsibility, he goes to sleep himself, planning to make his defensive preparations the next day. During the night he is overrun and defeated, and his men are shot in their tents as they sleep. The Boers easily take the drift, and the British have 10 killed and 21 wounded.

**Observations:** Lieutenant Forethought clearly had little experience as a leader in the field. He made several mistakes that showed his immaturity. His first mistake was failing to include his NCOs in any kind of planning. He confused being in charge with being the one person who could think. Second, he did not begin his construction of defenses immediately, because the soldiers were tired. Again, he was confused; he let the comfort of his men come before their safety.

During our recent brigade combined arms field training exercise (Gauntlet), the First Sergeant made an inspection of the company's fighting positions. The soldiers had constructed the fighting positions and each NCO felt that the positions were adequate for the first few days at that particular field site. The First Sergeant took great care to explain to each NCO the deficiencies of the fighting positions and the necessity to fully defend the BSA from the first day in any field site. The First Sergeant then released the soldiers, and he and the NCOs redug

each fighting position. Although the process was unpleasant, the value of safety over comfort was clearly explained. We did not make that mistake again. The sentries silhouetted by their bonfires may seem ridiculous to modern soldiers, but consider what we do in the BSA that is almost as bad: Tents and shelters have lights that, when improperly shielded, are worse than bonfires; they point right to the headquarters element or sleeping areas. Generators give a clear signature of activities when improperly shielded, and tents without camouflage also give the enemy a clear indication of the size and location of each unit.

#### **Recommendations:**

1. A defensive plan. The FSB commander and S-3 (operations officer) must have thought out where each unit in the BSA will be and why. The platoon leader is responsible for informing each member of the platoon about the plan and making sure each understands and executes the plan.
2. Clear priorities of work. There are simply not enough soldiers to do everything needed for a good defense simultaneously. What is more important and why? The answers to these questions will vary with each situation. The fuel section may devote more resources to camouflaging the fuel tankers, while the maintenance section may prioritize fighting positions or vehicle recovery.
3. Battle tasks. This is tied to the priorities of work. Each soldier must know what to do when he or she hits the area of operations. Those orders should have been given and the execution practiced long ago at sergeant's time. Make sure to include the platoon leaders and all the NCOs; their duties are critical to the initial success of the defense.
4. A low battlefield signature. Limit your signature as much as possible: Camouflage tents, sandbag generators, and seal cracks where light might slip through.

## Questions:

1. What are our priorities of work in the BSA? Don't forget that as supporters we may have to put the customers' urgent needs first. The threat level around the BSA and the mission of the maneuver units must be taken into consideration.
2. How do we choose our fighting positions and our sleeping positions—for convenience or for security? Convenience would dictate fighting positions very close to tents and trucks, whereas security would necessitate locating the positions away from where the soldiers sleep. (Not as easy as it sounds. You might say, "Security is the right answer, of course," but how quickly and efficiently you do your job—support—relates directly to the effectiveness of the killers.)
3. How do we get from our sleeping areas to our fighting positions at night, while the enemy is shooting at us? Remember the four Ps—plan, practice, practice and practice.
4. What are the particular responsibilities of the officers, of the NCOs, and of the individual soldiers?

## Chapter Two

### SSG Steve Newman

#### (92A30, Automated Logistical Specialist)

**Story:** In the second dream, Lieutenant Forethought began his defensive preparations immediately. He ordered some of his soldiers to build a trench around their camp, which was in the low ground near the drift. The other soldiers erected the tents and prepared food. The trench was an unbroken square, about 100 meters on each of the four sides. The soldiers were able to dig about one-half meter down; they used the removed dirt to make a parapet or dirt mound, about one-half meter high, in front of the trench. Around their camp, about 100 meters in front of the trench, was scrub brush and vegetation the British felt would give them concealment. Lieutenant Forethought also sent out two groups to act as listening posts/observations posts

(LPs/OPs). The sentries were placed out, but without bonfires this time, and hidden in the brush. During the evening, the Boers attacked; although they did not overrun the camp right away, they began to wear away at the British. Since the British cover consisted of mounds of dirt, they had to raise their heads above the dirt to fire—usually getting their heads shot off for their trouble. Once the Boers surrounded the camp, they were able to shoot across the camp and into the backs of the British facing the other direction. Lieutenant Forethought eventually gave up at dawn, with 24 dead and six wounded.

**Observations:** Sometimes soldiers in the BSA focus on their jobs (i.e., support) and neglect the basics of defense. Reading this story, it seemed inconceivable that someone could make so many mistakes. Modern armies don't build trenches, they built fighting positions. This clearly saves a great deal of time since most of the trench was unused by the British. But other mistakes made with the trenches we might make today. How would the British know if their trench would protect them from enemy fire on all sides, and how would we know if our position was correct today? We would validate the position by getting in the hole and having our soldiers walk out to where the enemy would be to see what the enemy would see. Next we would clear the fields of fire. Since I am expected to hit targets at 300 meters with my M16A2, I should have a clear field of fire at least as far as I can shoot. Today, we have several advantages over the British in Africa. In the BSA, we have forklifts for moving barrier material, M88 tracked vehicles for moving dirt and clearing fields of fire, and crew-served weapons and night-vision equipment.

A final mistake Lieutenant Forethought made was to work during the day and sleep at night. I recently served as an augmented observer/ controller (O/C) at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) at Fort Polk, Louisiana. During that rotation as an O/C, I observed a clear delineation between those trained and comfortable with night-vision equipment and those who were not trained. The permanent O/Cs were well trained and experienced with their night-vision equipment, and they were as effective at night as

they were during the day. The rotational unit, on the other hand, did not spend time training with their night-vision equipment and they suffered a serious degradation of their ability during periods of limited visibility.

### **Recommendations:**

1. Proof each fighting position by getting in it. What can you see and what can you shoot? Can you easily be shot while in your hole? Look at things from the bad guy's point of view, and ask yourself what he can see and shoot. Then continue to improve your position.
2. Clear your fields of fire, so you can engage the enemy at the maximum distance. This gives you the most warning and stops the enemy from getting close enough to ascertain important targets such as valuable supply assets or headquarters areas.
3. Don't think in terms of night and day. Think 24-hour operations, but take advantage of the daylight and darkness. You can dig during the day and eat after dark. Tents and shelters can be erected at night, limiting the enemy's ability to note the location. (Remember, it does take training to put up a tent at night without hurting someone.) The U.S. Army has a tremendous advantage with the night-vision equipment assigned to each unit. Train with this equipment as if your life depended on it.

### **Questions:**

1. What assets do we have at our disposal to help us dig or prepare our defense? Who has the responsibility of requesting and coordinating these resources?
2. Who, by name, checks each hole?
3. Who, by name, will walk the engagement area?

## **Chapter Three**

### **SGT William Baucom (92A20, Automated Logistical Specialist)**

**Story:** In the third dream, Lieutenant Forethought decided to try to correct his previous mistakes by

sending a patrol to collect all the male villagers in the area and bring them inside the camp. He also chose a location for his camp 800 meters south of the drift. He instructed his soldiers to dig a shallow linear trench 50 meters long, perpendicular to the road and oriented toward the drift. The next day a group of Boers approached the camp. The female villagers were waiting for the Boers and warned them of the British location. The Boers retreated out of rifle range and began to shell the British with their artillery. Since Lieutenant Forethought had insisted the trench be perfectly linear, once the Boers had the range correct, they were able to drop shells into the shallow trench. Lieutenant Forethought had no choice but to surrender.

**Observations:** The English are still failing to put themselves inside the enemy's head and are merely doing as they are told. Not one English soldier from the lieutenant on down has exhibited any initiative. The British Army, like the U.S. Army, tends to like straight lines and neat formations. This insistence on a straight trench enabled the Boers to drop shells right into the British trench by simply moving their guns left and right once they had the range. During my company's last National Training Center (NTC) rotation, the supply platoon's ten 5K-fuel tankers were arranged neatly along a trail to facilitate refueling operations. Every day an opposing forces (OPFOR) mortar team would attack the BSA and destroy several fuel tankers. We eventually learned to stagger the fuel tankers and park them away from the road; we also concealed them behind dirt mounds. Once these steps were taken, we did not lose any more fuel tankers.

### **Recommendations:**

1. Put yourself in the enemy's shoes. How would you attack the BSA? Where are the weak areas and how would you exploit them?
2. Beware of building things too neatly. Tents or foxholes built in a straight line make them easier to target. Nature does not usually grow in perfectly straight lines. Stagger your fighting positions, tents, vehicles, etc.—anything that

might be targeted; it will make them easier to camouflage and harder to fire upon.

3. Continuously improve your fighting positions. Although a shallow hole is better than no hole, it does little more than give the soldiers a place to hide from small-arms fire.

### Questions

1. What is your unit's reaction to artillery fire? Can you stay in your fighting position while in a chemical environment?
2. What is the enemy's most likely avenue of approach? How do you respond if they come from the most likely or least likely avenue of approach?

## Chapter Four

### SGT Rodney Weathers (55B20, Ammunition Specialist)

**Story:** The fourth battle began as had all the previous battles, but this time Lieutenant Forethought made some changes. Defensive work began immediately, and Lieutenant Forethought again chose an area away from the drift that had a ravine. The British improved the ravine to be used as fighting positions. The spoil from their digging they again used as cover in the form of a dirt mound or parapet in front of each soldier. Lieutenant Forethought sent a patrol to bring all civilians in the area into his camp, and he placed soldiers on nearby high ground to act as observers. He allowed the civilians to dig defensive positions for themselves. He ordered his soldiers to continue with the improvement of their fighting positions throughout the next day. When the enemy eventually showed up, they were unaware of the British presence. However, at 1800 meters away the Boers noticed the severe contrast between the natural earth and the spoil from the British fighting positions, so they placed some artillery on a nearby mountain and began to shell the British. Although the actual explosions did not harm the British, the shelling kept their heads down long enough to allow the Boers to get into the vegetation near the British trench. Once again the Boer fire from cover was devastating to the British, since they had to raise

their heads above cover to fire at the Boers. The Boers also sent a group behind the British, since their trench was oriented only to the north. The OP soldiers were taken under fire as they tried to return to the trench and were either killed or wounded. The Boers eventually placed their artillery behind the British trench and began firing directly into the trench. The British surrendered with 25 killed and 17 wounded. The majority of the hits had come from the rear and flanks once the Boers had maneuvered around the trench.

**Observations:** The BSA is a big, bright, noisy, active mess. There are vehicles moving all day and night and there are lights and generators giving off a signature that can be seen and heard for miles around. The BSA cannot hide, but it can deceive. Fighting positions can be concealed and vehicles can be hidden. During my battalion's field preparation for NTC rotation 99-06 (Gauntlet), I was the OPFOR commander. As we planned our attack on the BSA, it was easy to observe where each fighting position was located. Each platoon would stand around each hole and watch the one or two soldiers as they worked on a fighting position. Since there was no attempt to deceive my team of "bad guys," we were able to slip between the positions and attack the battalion tactical operations center (TOC). My team of five OPFOR soldiers stopped the battalion operations for more than an hour. Finally, note the tremendous benefit of maneuver in the offense. The Boers were easily able to defeat the British by holding their attention at the front and flanking them around the rear. The ability to move forces in the defense or offense is a key to success.

### Recommendations:

1. Ensure the soldiers in your observation post have a safe way to return to your position. This should include a covered and/or concealed route of return and a recognition signal to avoid friendly fire.
2. Go stand in your enemy's shoes. This can't be overemphasized. You will never be able

to guess what the enemy can do until you see things from his point of view.

3. Retain some flexibility. You must be able to act decisively to counter a threat. If the enemy attacks one position on your perimeter, you must be able to mass forces either by moving some of your defenders or by using a quick reaction force.

#### **Questions:**

1. How do we deal with civilians on the battlefield?
2. Where are our flanks and how do we defend them?
3. How do we protect our LPs/OPs?
5. How can we use maneuver in the defense?

### **Chapter Five**

#### **SGT (P) Louise Chee (77F20, Petroleum Supply Specialist)**

**Story:** As the fifth dream begins, Lieutenant Forethought places his command tent at the top of Waschout Hill. This allows him to observe the drift and see all other ground for miles around. He leaves the abandoned huts and garbage that make up the village on top of Waschout Hill intact to conceal his command tent. He also instructs his soldiers to round up all local inhabitants to be used as a work force and to deny them the ability to act as spies for the Boers. Lieutenant Forethought and his men build a circle of trenches around the top of the hill, allowing observation and fire in every direction. He then sends several NCOs out to observe the positions from the enemy's perspective. As soon as the British sentries report a group of Boers on their way, Lieutenant Forethought jumps into a trench to see the field of fire. The field of observation and fire offered by the trench does not allow the British to shoot at the drift or the road below. The only spot the British can place fire upon is 1500 meters ahead of the drift. Lieutenant Forethought decides to fire upon the main bodies as they pass through the narrow fire

window. He is forced to give away his position as Boer scouts ride up Waschout Hill and are fired upon by the British. Several scouts are killed or wounded, but the main body rushes through to the drift and gets away. The British inflict heavy damage on the Boers but fail to stop them.

**Observations:** The British have made many improvements since the first dream, since they have chosen a much better position and have controlled the civilians effectively. Although Lieutenant Forethought is making progress adapting the lessons he has learned so far, he does make a fairly common mistake: He determines the location of the fighting positions without proofing each hole. For some reason, it is easy for the human mind to visualize the location without actually seeing the view from ground level. One of the marks of good leaders is that they will do what their soldiers do. The good leaders will train with the soldiers, and go where the soldiers go. This helps the leader understand what the soldiers are going through and how to effectively employ the unit and how to improve the lives of the soldiers. If Lieutenant Forethought had done this, he would have seen that the defensive positions the British had dug were useless.

#### **Recommendations:**

1. After determining the location of each position, get down on the ground to check the field of fire. Once the hole has been dug, reconfirm the field of fire. Then look through the sight of the weapon that is assigned to that position.
2. Ensure all your equipment is properly camouflaged. If time allows, create some distraction by using fake or obsolete equipment. Anything exposed or lacking camouflage will draw fire.
3. Initiate any attack with the heaviest weapon you have, not a whistle or a flare. If your first action isn't casualty-producing, you will lose the initiative.

### Questions:

1. How do you camouflage your fighting positions?
2. How do you mark and cover dead space (area not impacted by direct fire)?
3. What priority do you give infantry training for support soldiers?

### Conclusion

This article clearly shows that we can learn valuable tactical lessons from historical text. Lieutenant Forethought made two major mistakes while building his defense, and those mistakes led to his defeat in the first five dreams. First, he did not use his NCOs. This might have been acceptable in the British Army of the early 1900s, but it will not work in the U.S. Army of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The only way for a unit to be successful is for the NCOs to be an active part of the planning and execution of every mission. The second major mistake was the absence of any plan. No one, neither the NCOs nor the officer, was prepared for the challenge. A well-thought-out plan utilizing specifically assigned battletasks for each soldier would have made the British successful from the start. We have incorporated the lessons discussed into our platoon-training

plan, and we are confident that the supply platoon will be more effective as a result of our study of *The Defense of Duffer's Drift*.

### Training Evaluation

This platoon training was conducted in two steps:

1. Individual evaluation of historical text, assessing its relevance to current tactical problems.
2. Development of an oral/written presentation to the platoon.

We found this method to be extremely successful for several reasons. First, the novel's ideas were easy to understand and relate to modern military defensive procedures. Second, the presentation of unfamiliar material to an audience motivated the speaker to fully understand the material to be presented. And finally, the presentation by section sergeants motivated the section member to ask comprehensive questions in an attempt to "stump the chump." This method worked very well, (and we have already begun on our next novel).

[Editor's Note: "The Defense of Duffer's Drift Brigade Support Area" was submitted by Captain Steve Lewis, who is now serving as Operations Officer for the 498<sup>th</sup> Combat Support Battalion (Provisional) in Yongsan, Korea. As a platoon leader at Fort Riley, Kansas, he tasked his NCOs to read Swinton's *The Defense of Duffer's Drift* and then apply that "lessons-learned" model to the tactical situations their own unit could face. This paper is the result of that innovative training technique.]