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## OPFOR: PREREQUISITE FOR VICTORY

by

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The Romans are sure of victory, for their exercises are battles without bloodshed, and their battles are bloody exercises.<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

At the National Training Center (NTC), located in the desolate Mojave Desert at Fort Irwin, California, the U.S. Army trains armor, mechanized infantry, light infantry, aviation, artillery, combat service and combat service support units for war. The full scope of combined arms warfare is tested for a brigade-sized unit against a Soviet-styled opposing force (OPFOR) in both force-on-force and live-fire scenarios.

The fall of the Soviet empire, however, has brought a new debate concerning the preparation of Army units for war. For the past 46 years the United States Army trained against its major threat, the vaunted Soviet hordes that were expected to surge through Europe in a modern-day tank blitzkrieg. Today that threat is all but gone. The awesome Warsaw Pact, led by the steamrolling Soviet Army, is a menace of the recent past.

Shrinking defense budgets, as much as the reduced threat of conventional war in Europe, are changing how the Army trains for war. Theories concerning the "transformation of war," which propose the obsolescence of conventional military forces, will also influence this debate. Conversely, the increased willingness to use U.S. ground forces, as seen in Operation Desert Storm, continued deployments to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, problems with Iraq, intervention in Somalia and the

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increased possibility of military intervention in the Balkans, demands that the U.S. Army have an effective and realistic combat training program.

Another serious question involves the composition of U.S. Army ground forces. Does the Army still need an armor-mechanized force trained to fight against a heavily mechanized opponent? Though predicting the character and opponents of the next war is a difficult task, the answer to this question appears to be a resounding “yes.” Future contingency operations are likely to be regional affairs involving the full spectrum of war (hopefully with the exclusion of nuclear weapons). These kinds of wars have historically emphasized conventional military forces. Many of America’s potential zones of conflict include adversaries with well-equipped, combined arms armies. World events still dramatically reinforce the need for well-trained, highly motivated U.S. Army units skilled in the execution of combined arms warfare.

Today, some influential pundits believe that warfare has transformed into a situation where conventional military power is no longer relevant. Even Martin Van Creveld, the well-known military historian and theorist hedged his bets in his book *The Transformation of War*, saying “it may still be too early to celebrate or lament, depending on one’s point of view, the demise of conventional war among regular, state-controlled, armed forces.”<sup>2</sup> The argument that conventional forces are irrelevant seems premature, at best. Theorists may try to wish away Desert Storm as an aberration, but the fact remains that conventional military force was the only credible way of freeing Kuwait and preventing Iraq from threatening the oil resources of the Gulf. In spite of after-the-fact denials, it is generally accepted that U.S. strategic interests, ranging from control of the world’s oil supply to the disruption of Iraq’s nuclear programs, were driving forces behind the Gulf War. For the next decade, at the very least, the world seems full of challenges to test the mettle of U.S. conventional military forces. The U.S. Army must prepare to meet the challenges of conventional warfare. The place where it does this best is the NTC.

### **The History of the NTC Concept — A Revolution in Combat Training**

In the 1950s, ’60s and ’70s the U.S. Army trained against mythical enemies to prepare for war. These enemies, called aggressor forces of the “Circle Trigon,” represented no specific nationality and no coherent doctrine. Aggressor forces were ad hoc organizations, scripted to play a specific role. No battle engagement simulation devices (such as the present-day MILES devices)<sup>3</sup> were available for units to hone their tactical skills. Fighting against the aggressors of the Circle Trigon “smacked a lot of cowboys and Indians, with very stupid indolent Indians.”<sup>4</sup> Army trainers recognized the need for a dramatic change.

Rejecting the Circle Trigon, the Army sought better ways to train units for war. The seeds of the Army’s revolution in combined arms training began, surprisingly, with the U.S. Navy. During the early years of the Vietnam War, the Navy’s kill ratio for air-to-air combat was alarmingly poor. Instead of the 13:1 kill ratio that American pilots had experienced in the Korean War, the Navy was getting a 2:1 ratio for kills over Vietnam. The critical pilot skills of air-to-air combat had been lost, in spite of dramatic improvements in aircraft, electronics and missile systems. To correct this problem the Navy conducted a study in 1968 called the “Air-to-Air Systems Capability Review.” The result of this

study was the creation of the now famous “Top Gun” program. One year after the inception of Top Gun, the Navy’s kill ratio had returned to 13 North Vietnamese aircraft destroyed for every Navy aircraft lost. Training against a live opponent, in free-play force-on-force maneuvers, had made a dramatic difference in combat effectiveness.

The Navy was impressed with the results of the program and began sending all of its tactical fighter pilots through the Top Gun training program. Soon, Top Gun became **the** method of combat instruction. Initially, however, the Navy program pitted F-4 Phantom jets against F-4 Phantom jets. Each pilot used U.S. tactics against the other. This concept is often called “Blue-on-Blue” training. Blue-on-Blue training pits combatants against enemies who execute similar tactics. It has the obvious drawback of training the combatants for the wrong type of battle.

The Air Force studied the Navy’s Top Gun program and quickly decided to create a program of its own. USAF trainers copied the Navy’s concept and proceeded one step further. The Air Force equipped their “enemy” with an “unlike” aircraft and taught their “aggressor” pilots to use enemy tactics. The Air Force program was called “Red Flag.” Aggressor pilots (who were trained to fight and fly like Russian pilots) were soon out-maneuvering their “Blue” adversaries. Blue pilots fought and learned in the process. The collective expertise of Air Force tactical fighter pilots increased dramatically. “The USAF flight community not only fought, it analyzed and evaluated the ‘battles,’ searching for lessons; and as the Aggressors got better, so did the visiting units.”<sup>5</sup> In the final analysis, it didn’t matter so much that the Red Flag pilots flew by Russian tactics, but that they fought with different tactics (other than Blue tactics) and were very difficult to beat. The key difference was that the enemy fought a skilled opponent who fought with different tactics. The Navy soon changed its program to include dissimilar “enemy” aircraft and tactics.

Based on the success of the Top Gun and Red Flag concepts, the United States Army developed a sophisticated ground combat training center to accomplish the same force-on-force training for armored combined arms units. Built in the early 1980s, the NTC has become the focus of the Army’s combat training strategy for mechanized warfare — the Army’s Top Gun school for AirLand Operations. There, U.S. Army units fight mock battles against an opposing force permanently based at the NTC.

At the NTC, Army combat brigades train in the most realistic conditions short of actual war. Every brigade in the United States rotates several battalions to the NTC each year. These units are called the “Blue Force.” Blue Force units arrive at the NTC, draw their equipment from the NTC equipment stockyard, and prepare for 14 days of intense battle. Battles are fought against the Red Force with the use of a sophisticated laser-shooter and laser-sensor package that is attached to each vehicle, soldier and weapon. These lasers are completely safe, replicate the exact effects of the assigned weapon, and perform the function of designating direct-fire battle casualties. With this equipment, the Blue Force battles the Red Force in numerous bloodless battles to learn the difficult art of war. The most important learning point is that the outcome of these simulated battles is determined by the actions of the players, not by umpires or a preconceived script. These battles also provide the U.S. Army a treasure house of valuable lessons learned concerning the conduct and execution of modern combined arms combat.

The OPFOR is the sparring partner and principal teacher in the NTC's 1000-square-mile classroom. The use of the OPFOR represents a modern revolution in the conduct of training for combined arms warfare. The training philosophy behind this concept is that a thinking, highly-trained adversary will provide the best simulation for actual combat. It is based on a belief that soldiers, well trained and well led, win wars. Training, therefore, is seen as a dramatic force-multiplier on the battlefield. Sophisticated weapons are vital, but weapons alone cannot decide the issue. "The best troops cannot win if they are badly equipped, but good equipment in the hands of poor troops or badly led troops also cannot win."<sup>6</sup> The value of the NTC was dramatically displayed by the effectiveness of U.S. Army forces in the 1991 Gulf War.

The opposition force tended to win. The army did lose its first battle, over and over again, but only against its own opposition force. It came to Saudi Arabia chastened, as previous American armies had been chastened by their early failures, and well aware of what it had to do. Thus in enormous contrast to previous wars, the U.S. Army which came to Saudi Arabia in 1990-91 was already somewhat battle-hardened and battle-wise. It proved remarkably effective when the time came to fight.<sup>7</sup>

The soldiers of the U.S. Army need no explanation of the utility of the NTC. To them, the NTC is recognized as the premier combat training experience. The NTC is the focus of their training effort. It provides a "known enemy" to test their mettle against. The combat lessons learned from tangling with the OPFOR, and overcoming the harsh desert terrain, provide the U.S. Army with valuable tactical experience. Beating the OPFOR has become the measure of tactical success and the means to prepare the Army for war. Again, the Gulf War proved the value of this concept: "In effect, the war in the Persian Gulf was the first war in American history that its armed forces were actually trained and prepared for. All of America's previous wars, right back to the Revolution, were ad hoc affairs. This one was different, beginning and ending with the effectiveness of American troops."<sup>8</sup>

### **Why the Army Needs a Tough OPFOR**

The Army uses the NTC to sharpen its combat edge. As General Carl E. Vuono said: "No American soldier must ever die in combat because we failed to provide the tough, realistic training demanded by the battlefields of today."<sup>9</sup> The grindstone of this sharpening process is the Army's OPFOR regiment. The opposing forces regiment is permanently stationed at the NTC. The organization and doctrine of the OPFOR Krasnovian Army is derived from the organization, equipment and doctrine of the pre-1991 Soviet Army. This "enemy" regiment consists of two battalions of U.S. Army soldiers. The soldiers of these two battalions use the same laser-shooter and laser sensor devices used by the Blue Force. The OPFOR, however, fight with Soviet-style "threat" equipment and tactics.

Each Army battalion stationed in the continental United States trains at the NTC for "two weeks of simulated combat, twenty-four hours a day, against a world-class enemy force that had been organized and equipped to fight like Soviets — OPFOR prided itself on trouncing the visiting team with great regularity."<sup>10</sup> The OPFOR became a tough, unscripted enemy. The soldiers from the OPFOR regiment fight battles against the best brigades in the Army almost every day of the year. This

demanding schedule provides the OPFOR excellent training and perfects their tactical techniques through constant repetition. This constant battle training makes the OPFOR a superb opponent for the units of the United States Army.

The OPFOR concept employs the principal of overtraining. The Blue Force has to win, not just get lucky, to secure victory against the OPFOR. This concept drives home the lessons learned and creates the conditions for superior units. After a rotation at the NTC, a Blue Force battalion's combat operating systems (command and control, maneuver, fire support, intelligence, air defense, mobility-counter-mobility-survivability and combat service support) are thoroughly exercised. A weaker opponent, one that would not challenge the combat systems of the visiting Blue Force units, would not produce the necessary lessons learned to justify the cost of the NTC.

The OPFOR provides Blue Force units with the fundamental training tool that sets the conditions to train the Army's combined arms forces. "The NTC breeds battle-wise soldiers bloodlessly,"<sup>11</sup> because the OPFOR drives home the lessons of combat in dramatic force-on-force simulated combat. There is no argument about "who shot John," or disagreements about what should have happened. The lessons are real-time, vivid and self-evident. General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, even before Desert Storm, had learned to appreciate the great value of the NTC. "I'd come away convinced that it gave us an advantage over every other army in the world. We could now teach and evaluate our armored forces under circumstances so closely resembling battle that the only absent elements were actual wounds and death."<sup>12</sup>

### **What Doctrine Should the OPFOR Use?**

For the past 12 years, the OPFOR has predominantly employed the doctrine and organization of the old Soviet Army. The army that this model was based on is now a mere shadow of its former self. At one time, however, it represented the greatest challenge to U.S. combined arms forces. It was a force to be reckoned with and the most challenging that our primary adversaries could produce. But the U.S. Army will never again have to fight the Soviet Army. Why should the OPFOR continue to use the Soviet Krasnovian model if the model does not represent a real enemy?

The answer to this question rests in the nature of war itself. There is no greater teacher, in combat, than the enemy. No one but the enemy can show you what the enemy is going to do. No one but the enemy can teach you how to win. Only the enemy shows you where you are weak. The OPFOR is designed to do this. The U.S. Army learns much about itself, and about its own doctrine, by opposing the OPFOR in mock battles in the desert.

The OPFOR is the optimum enemy, challenging the full gamut of Army combat systems to the greatest degree possible. In addition, the current OPFOR Krasnovian (i.e., Soviet) doctrine is rich in historical example and was designed by a nation that was organized for combat, a nation organized to defeat the United States. Together, Krasnovian organization and doctrine provide a strong foundation for a tough combined arms opponent for U.S. units. That kind of challenge does not come from a weak sparring partner.

At the tactical level, it is critical to fully exercise a unit's combat operating systems. It doesn't matter if the enemy you fight in training does not precisely replicate a known foe. For years the Army trained at the NTC, preparing for a war in Europe, because the Army believed the lessons transcended the terrain. It is the same with the OPFOR doctrine and organization. Fighting the OPFOR prepares the Army for any potential adversary in the world.

Some people argue that the Army should institute a change to the NTC to allow Blue-on-Blue fighting. This argument is a mathematical proposal that stresses "more bang for the buck." It argues that if Blue-on-Blue fights took place at the NTC, more Army units could be trained in less time. This argument, which seems attractive in an era of limited training dollars, is unrealistic and oversimplified. The argument should be rejected for the same reasons that the Navy and Air Force employ "aggressor" trained forces.

Others argue for what has been labeled the "dial-a-threat" concept. In this scheme, the OPFOR would change doctrine from Krasnovian to Middle Eastern (Samaritan), to Northeast Asian (Hamchuk), to whatever the plans called for. The OPFOR needs time to develop its tactical proficiency. It requires training to master doctrine and to practice its moves and techniques. During Desert Shield/Storm it took at least three months and several NTC rotations for the OPFOR to change from Krasnovian-style tactics to Samaritan-style tactics. The "dial-a-threat" concept would provide, by design, at best an amateur OPFOR and not the skilled opponent needed by a small, yet highly trained, U.S. Army.

How important is it that the OPFOR model any particular enemy? Perfect modeling may be beyond anyone's capacity. No regime of training can recreate, exactly, how a potential adversary would think and fight. What is important is that the enemy be different. This argues against Blue-on-Blue training. What is important is that the Army's task force and brigade systems have an opportunity to fight the Blue Force and are out to win. With this regard, the organization and doctrine of the OPFOR is critical. The doctrine that appears to accomplish this best is the Krasnovian model currently used at the NTC.

How can we ever be sure that we are training to fight the enemy that we will actually meet in battle? Is it so important to spar against an opponent who represents the next, most likely threat? There is no easy answer to this question. Recent history surely points to our collective inability to determine the next shooting enemy. Who could have predicted Panama, Desert Storm or Somalia? Remarkably, the Army that fought so well in Desert Storm was largely trained at the NTC against an OPFOR that used Krasnovian, not Iraqi-style, doctrine. During Desert Shield the OPFOR retrained to fight like Iraqis and developed what was called Samaritan doctrine to help train the National Guard. None of the National Guard units trained at the NTC, however, deployed to Desert Storm.

I cannot help but remember a military history instructor who asked my class a question when I was a cadet. The professor asked, "Against whom and where will America fight the next conflict?" Each cadet pondered the question, hoping to prove an in-depth grasp of current affairs by answering intelligently. In turn, we listed locations that ranged from China to the Hindu-Kush to South America to Detroit. The instructor carefully entertained each answer, nodding his understanding for every potential flashpoint. Finally, after all the cadets had completed their answers, we asked where and against whom the instructor thought the next conflict would be. With a gleam in his eye he answered:

“First it will be against an enemy who doesn’t think like we do. Someone who doesn’t value the same things we do. That’s why we will fight. It always boils down to a contest of values and difference of opinion. Secondly, it will almost assuredly occur where we least expect it!”

The battalions that fought in Desert Storm were trained against the old Krasnovian-style model. Only units of the National Guard and the 4th Infantry Division (Mechanized), neither of which deployed to the Gulf, trained against the Iraqi-style Samarian doctrine. Apparently, the Krasnovian-style OPFOR provided the right training stimulus even though it did not exactly replicate the tactics of our Iraqi adversaries. The training at the NTC was lauded continually by combat veterans in the Gulf War. “To a great extent, the massive tank and air-to-surface battles of the desert war were won at the Army’s National Training Center in the Mojave Desert.”<sup>13</sup>

At the tactical level, the Army needs to exercise its combat operating systems against a well-trained enemy who executes a well-thought-out and established doctrine. We will probably not know the enemy that we will fight in the next war until the use of force is already decided. This fact heightens the need for a challenging opponent. OPFOR tactics and organization must fully challenge the capability for U.S. Army units to execute AirLand Operations. The OPFOR must be a team that plays to win, a team that fights “differently” than the Blue Force. Although the Soviet Union is no longer the adversary, the Krasnovian model represents the toughest “threat” U.S. units would ever expect to face. In this way the Army can train in an environment that forces systems to get stronger and helps to perfect combat techniques. Facing a weaker opponent, with a lesser doctrine, would provide easier victories in training but could result in disaster on the battlefield.

Soldiers cannot be programmed like computers. They must feel and sense the battlefield. They must learn for themselves the meaning of friction, test the limits of flexibility and deal with the inherent uncertainty of war. The NTC provides these experiences, which are the OPFOR’s most valuable training products. A living, thinking OPFOR helps commanders and soldiers to focus on these issues and on the critical human dimensions of war. Regardless of the threat model, the units that train at the NTC must be stressed to the limit by an enemy capable of beating them on a level playing field. Desert Storm is a perfect example of how the OPFOR enhanced unit effectiveness. “The U.S. Army that fought in the Persian Gulf War was trained at Fort Irwin, California. The training at the ‘NTC’ is thorough and realistic, and produced a desert army schooled in AirLand Battle Doctrine and tactics. Perhaps even more than the Israelis, the United States possessed the best-trained desert army in the world.”<sup>14</sup>

Validation of the OPFOR concept was evident in the comments of a troop commander who had participated in the battle of 73 Easting in Iraq during Desert Storm. Asked by then Army Chief of Staff General Vuono, “How do you explain your great success in your first battle?” the officer replied:

Sir, this was not our first battle. This was our fifteenth battle! We fought three wars at the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, California. ... Yes, Sir, we had been ‘shot at’ before. Many times. This war was just like our training.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to enhancing combat techniques, the battles against the OPFOR provide the Army with a host of valuable byproducts. Tempered under the fire of an NTC rotation, a unit and its soldiers mature and develop a battle sense that cannot be provided anywhere else but in actual combat. Over one hundred years ago, the great military writer Colonel Ardant du Picq explained the vital role that this kind of realistic training has on developing the morale of fighting units. His words seem to echo the spirit of the role of a well-trained OPFOR at the NTC:

Esprit de corps is secured in war. But war becomes shorter and shorter and more and more violent. Consequently, secure esprit de corps in advance. Mental acquaintanceship is not enough to make a good organization. All must work for battle and not merely live, quietly going through with drills without understanding their application. ... Marches and battle maneuvers are what is needed.<sup>16</sup>

The OPFOR should retain the Krasnovian model. Upgrades in organization, weapons and tactics should be included to reflect real-world capabilities. The OPFOR must continue to challenge rotational units by being a first-class sparring partner capable of challenging the combat operating systems of the Army's armor and mechanized brigades.

A previous commander of the OPFOR regiment at the NTC explained the reasons for retaining the Krasnovian model in a recent article in *Red Thrust* magazine:

There is one central and rarely discussed reason to retain the Soviet doctrine for the Krasnovian OPFOR model. There is no other doctrine in the world capable of supplying the OPFOR with the richness, depth, and completeness of tactical operations for a battlefield framework. ... From a practitioner's view, when we place a large force onto the training battlefield in a free-play environment, the "key to operating tactically is a logical linkage between the doctrinal sub-systems. To be of use, the doctrine must have compatibility between all sub-components. It must be whole. ... The Soviets have spent fifty years and three wars developing, modifying, and updating their doctrine."<sup>17</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The demise of the Warsaw Pact and the overwhelming allied victory in Operation Desert Storm have, remarkably, caused some people to question the future need for mechanized, combined arms combat. Today, Europe is experiencing in Yugoslavia its longest war since the Second World War. Instability among nations and economies appears to be the rule rather than the exception. Contrary to what many would like to believe, conventional wars appear to be more likely now than during the Cold War.

In spite of the U.S. Army's expertise in conducting fast-tempo, combined arms warfare, the very systems which brought about victory are now viewed by some as relics of the Cold War. With these arguments comes the call for reduced numbers of heavy forces and a reduced role and shift in focus for the expensive training conducted at the NTC. In addition, there is an ongoing debate about the organization and doctrine that the OPFOR should employ.



War becomes increasingly complex as new weapons and new tactics are devised. The history of combat in the 20th century has proven that armies drilled in the techniques of combined arms warfare can win quickly with reduced friendly casualties.

The need for the NTC has never been more apparent than in the present downsizing environment. What the Army has spent in terms of dollars on the NTC, it has saved many times over in blood. Like the Roman armies of antiquity, the U.S. Army's effectiveness has been measured by the discipline, difficulty and realism of its combat training. The Army must continue this effort. If we expect to win wars with minimal casualties, our troops must be more challenged at the NTC than in combat. To paraphrase Josephus, the NTC offers the U.S. Army the ability to be sure of victory, by making training exercises into battles without bloodshed, and battles into bloody exercises.

### ENDNOTES

1. Flavius, Josephus, Jewish historian and general, 37-100 A.D., as quoted from Michael Grant, *The Army of the Caesars*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974), p. xxvii.
2. Martin Van Crevald, *The Transformation of War*, (New York: Maxwell Macmillan, Inc., 1991), pp. 16-17. In this book, Mr. Crevald predicts the demise of armies as we know them today and expounds on the irrelevance of conventional military forces.
3. MILES stands for Multiple Integrated Laser Engagement System. Developed by Xerox Electro-Optical, the system was first fielded for infantry weapons in 1981. MILES simulates the effects of weapons with eye-safe laser light. Each MILES-equipped weapon mimics the range and effects of the real weapon without producing casualties. MILES made force-on-force engagements and the NTC training concept possible.
4. Ann W. Chapman, *The Origins and Development of the National Training Center 1976-1984*, (Fort Monroe, Va.: Office of the Command Historian, United States Army Training and Doctrine Command, 1992), p. 85.
5. Daniel P. Bolger, *Dragons at War*, (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1986), pp. 16-17.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 237.
7. Norman Friedman, *Desert Victory, The War for Kuwait*, (Annapolis: The Naval Institute Press, 1991), p. 121.
8. James F. Dunnigan and Austin Bay, *From Shield to Storm*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1992), p. 306.
9. These remarks by then Army Chief of Staff General Carl E. Vuono are from his address to the Annual Meeting of the Association of the United States Army (AUSA), October 1989, as reported in *Army*, December 1989, pp. 45, 52-54.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 243.
11. Quote by General Paul F. Gorman, USA Ret., in Bolger, Dragons at War, p. viii.
12. Peter Petre, *General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, The Autobiography: It Doesn't Take A Hero*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1992), p. 243.
13. Friedman, p. 244.
14. Dunnigan, p. 445.
15. Notes from the 1992 Armor Conference at Fort Knox, Kentucky, concerning the After Action Review of the Battle of 73 Easting.
16. Colonel Ardant du Picq, translation by Major Robert C. Cotton, *Battle Studies*, (Harrisburg, Pa.: The Military Service Publishing Company, 1946), p. 122.
17. Colonel Patrick O'Neal, "The Opposing Force's Future," *Red Thrust*, PB-30-92-1, January 1992, p. 3.

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