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First of
a Series

Nuclear Weapons

And



Tactical Objectives

Compiled by LtCol W. L. Bates, Jr., Contributing Editor

IN THE SEPTEMBER 1961 GAZETTE (PROFESSIONAL SCRAPBOOK), LtCol E. V. B. Edmond, USA, was quoted as saying:

"I believe the use of tactical nuclear weapons in ground combat has invalidated the doctrine of assigning critical terrain features as objectives . . . the tremendous destructive capability of nuclear weapons has ended the logic of assigning an objective, other than complete destruction of the enemy's forces, to any ground tactical unit."

LtCol Edmond went on to say that if you took a hill that was really critical, it would hurt the enemy. If the enemy was hurt, he would put a blooper on you. So why bother with terrain objectives? Go with Clausewitz: "The destruction of the enemy's armed forces and his will to fight is the ultimate objective in war."

Protests weren't long in coming.

LtCol J. A. Apfel, Inspector-Instructor of 12thInfBn, USMCR, Pittsburgh, says in a letter to the GAZETTE that LtCol Edmond confused a technique with a principle and called the whole thing doctrine. He says further, "A closer look ought to be taken at the doctrine of securing critical terrain before we discard it. The principle of Objective is defined in that article as: 'The destruction of the enemy's armed forces and his will to fight is the ultimate military objective of war.' Implicit in this is the doctrine of 'critical' terrain as a tactical principle. Possession or dominance of a terrain feature may contribute to the destruction of the enemy's will to fight, as well as to the destruction of his armed forces.

"Critical terrain exists as a result of all of the circumstances involved in an action. It is a feature which, if

held by the enemy, will imperil friendly operations. This also means that friendly possession will facilitate friendly operations. A change in the circumstances involved may remove it from the definition, but if it is critical in the given situation the commander must recognize it as such. He can't change it unless he changes the circumstances which establish it as critical. If, through atomic or conventional attack, a particular critical terrain feature is neutralized as such, then some other feature will fill the definition in response to the new circumstances. If it's not the high ground, then it's the approaches to it; if not the approaches, then the surrounding low ground—and so on.

Infantry's Element: Terrain

"Ultimately, the critical terrain feature could be the plot of ground occupied by the enemy force. This isn't fighting the terrain and ignoring the enemy. Rather, it is associating the terrain with the enemy. If by its nature a critical terrain feature must be occupied, then a commander will fail to occupy it only at his own risk. In occupying it he may be subjected to nuclear attack. If so, the decision will have to be made in the context of the whole action and not solely because he has occupied the critical terrain, although his action may trigger the attack. Infantry must fight in its own element—terrain.

"LtCol Edmond says the enemy would use a nuclear weapon to neutralize the force which seized critical terrain. Isn't this answer self-defeating? Wouldn't the enemy also use a nuclear weapon to repel a force about to close with him on any ground? One can't ignore critical terrain. It must be correctly identified and eval-

Another New Feature



The Editor

Have atomic weapons invalidated the doctrine of assigning critical terrain features as tactical objectives? That's the question up for discussion in LtCol Bates' first "Developing Doctrine" column, which will sample reader opinion about ground combat doctrine on which attention needs to be focused. If you've got ideas or comments for future columns, send them to LtCol Bates, care of "Gazette." All contributions welcome. Payment on publication.

uated so that it can be used effectively in support of the tactical plan."

Another reader responded quickly—Capt Stephen Percy of MCS, Quantico. Capt Percy says:

"The ultimate objective always is the destruction of the enemy's forces and his will to fight. This objective is specifically set forth in our present TO as the mission for all Marine infantry units. All other Marine units have the mission of supporting the infantry in the accomplishment of this objective. Translated into immediate combat missions, this objective involves the seizure of critical terrain as a means of enhancing the success of operations designed to destroy the enemy.

"The principle of the seizure of critical terrain as an intermediate objective cannot be discarded because of the enemy's use of nuclear weapons. Critical terrain provides a means of locating the enemy, destroying a segment of his forces, and gaining an advantage over him. Critical terrain—a piece of high ground in LtCol Edmond's first example—would not necessarily prove a lucrative nuclear target for the enemy when seized by friendly forces. Superiority of combat power—mass—is required to seize critical terrain in most cases, but once seized the majority of the forces may be withdrawn, leaving a holding garrison which would not warrant the employment of nuclear munitions. Further, the seizure of such critical terrain disrupts an enemy's defenses, his observation over avenues of approach, and his fields of fire. Even if he were to neutralize the piece of terrain through the employment of atomic weapons he would not have restored the integrity of his battle position and reduced our advantage.

"Additionally, the use of critical terrain as an ob-

jective (intermediate) provides one of the best control measures available to the infantry unit leader at all levels. The control and coordination necessary between adjacent units is difficult at best when using these objectives. Coordinating supporting fires only adds to these problems, and the employment of nuclear munitions would vastly increase them. Take away the use of critical terrain as an objective, and this control and coordination—particularly in these days of great mobility—would become impossible. Imagine the difficulty, if you will, of a division, corps, or army trying to control units in a battle area broken down into Battalion TAORs with each unit trying to destroy the enemy without regard to terrain as a control feature and with relatively unlimited use of nuclear weapons. An indiscriminate holocaust would result, probably without achieving the ultimate objective."

It looks like the argument on both sides rapidly goes into outer space. Let's look at a few definitions and bring it down to earth.

Definition of Terms

First, doctrine is "that which is taught; a principle, or body of principles . . ." according to Merriam's *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*. Military men usually separate "doctrine" and "principle." *Webster's* defines principle as a source or origin, an ultimate basis or cause, a fundamental truth.

Second, AR 320-5, the *Dictionary of U. S. Army Terms*, says that critical terrain is any locality or area, the seizure or retention of which affords a marked advantage to either combatant.

The latter source defines objective as an end in view to be attained by the use of military force. It is also a locality or geographic feature to be gained.

Using these definitions, LtCol Edmonds seems to say that, with nuclear weapons in use:

- What we teach (doctrine) about assigning
- an area giving us a marked advantage (critical terrain feature)
- as a locality to be gained (objective)
- is wrong, because the only
- end in view for military force (objective)
- is the complete destruction of the enemy.

This puts a pretty heavy load on the platoon leader. LtCol Apfel and Capt Percy advance good points. The principle of the objective is the cardinal principle of war. FM 100-5 agrees with von Clausewitz—and Napoleon, too—in saying that the ultimate objective is the destruction of the enemy's armed forces and his will to fight.

Intermediate Objectives

In seeking this ultimate, intermediate objectives must be assigned. They are needed to coordinate the efforts of units in the field. These efforts are so intimately involved with terrain that terrain objectives are required.

Need these terrain objectives be the dominant hill or the vital cross-road? Need they be critical terrain features? As long as a critical terrain feature is one which offers a marked advantage to either combatant, we—and the enemy—have little choice.

In sum, we might recall the farmer who said: "Pigs is pigs." Critical terrain, and its use as objectives, are facts of combat life.

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