

“Digging In”

The Obsolete or Neglected Art?

by Captain Paul Maxwell

This article highlights an issue that does not get enough attention in the ground combat community — the construction of fighting positions.

After spending three years in a mechanized infantry battalion and two and a half years in the 2nd ACR, I noticed that the task of entrenchment receives little, if any, attention. When past battlefields have shown that artillery causes the majority of battle-related injuries, it is amazing that those hard-learned lessons have so readily slipped through our fingers. When discussing tactics in staff meetings and war games, the attitude often encountered is, “I don’t need to dig in. Speed is my security.” I cannot recall the number of times I have heard that from my counterparts.

Certainly there are times and situations where this idea is valid. However, it is my contention that we must teach our soldiers the importance of digging in, how to perform the task, and then instill the discipline to accomplish the task in tactical environments. A major lesson learned in World War II was, “Battalions that didn’t dig in for the night didn’t last long. That should have been learned in training, but it wasn’t, so it had to be learned from experience.”¹ We cannot wait until the casualties of the next major war begin flowing into the aid station to relearn the life-saving ability of the simple fighting position and the value of the spade.

When the subject of digging in arises, people in the Armor community most often think of tank and BFV fighting positions. This is natural, since most of a heavy battalion’s combat power is invested in these vehicles. However, we cannot limit our knowledge of fighting positions to these vehicles. Combat soldiers must know how to build two-man fighting positions, crew-served weapon positions, and simple survival positions. There is no question that they increase survivability from direct and indirect fires. A properly constructed position with overhead cover provides safety from

virtually everything except a direct hit. Of course, crews within tanks and Bradleys are protected from the effects of all but a direct hit from artillery and thus do not necessarily need fighting positions. The protection of our armor gives us security and our training in reacting to artillery reinforces the idea that we can simply drive out of the impact area and survive. When mounted and under armor, I agree with those who believe they do not always need fighting positions against artillery. Remember, though, that not all of the soldiers in our armor, infantry, and cavalry units are under armor all or even some of the time.

As an example, let’s examine a mechanized infantry battalion. In this case, a large portion of the combat platoons’ strength is dismounted infantry. Certainly these soldiers need to know how to construct fighting positions in the defense, or when in assembly areas within enemy artillery range. General Patton reinforced this idea in his writings, “...It is proper for a soldier to dig in when he has reached his final objective in an attack, or when he is bivouacking under circumstances where he thinks he may be strafed from the air or is within artillery range of the enemy.”² Despite the clear need for this knowledge, training on individual fighting positions was conducted only once in my three years in the infantry. Part of the reason for this is training area limitations that do not allow for digging. However, most of the blame results from the belief that this task is innate and does not need to be practiced.

In order to more directly link the topic to the armor community, let’s look at the structure of the 2nd ACR. The unit is open to all of the officers in our branch and all of the 19Ds, and thus we need to consider how to fight in that unit. Note the Dragoons’ total lack of armored vehicles. Thus there is no protection from artillery readily available. The idea that one can drive out of an impact area in a light-skinned HMMWV is not very feasible. At a minimum, your chances of

escaping intact have decreased significantly. Additionally, it is not always desirable to move from an observation post when it is in the optimal position to provide key intelligence. Despite the lack of armor in the unit, the speed attitude seems to prevail over entrenchment. Maybe MILES simulations have reduced our appreciation of the effects of artillery on the battlefield. The blast radius and the psychological effects of artillery are simply not effectively reproduced in these scenarios. Whatever the reason, in my two and a half years in the unit, training in construction of fighting positions occurred only once in one out of 12 ground combat companies. This does not place sufficient command emphasis on the task.

For those who still do not think the subject relates to them, let us consider an ordinary tank-pure battalion. One may ask, why do the soldiers of this battalion need to know how to dig-in? Rommel provides an answer: “The violence of the enemy artillery fire the day before had impressed us all with the value of spade work. Even the battalion staff, consisting of the battalion commander, adjutant, and four messengers, dug itself a twenty-foot trench...”³ Another reason is evident in a defensive scenario. It is accepted procedure for units to post OPs in the defense. How many leaders ensure that the OP constructs a fighting position? In the defense, we expect artillery on our position. Knowing that, we should provide protection to our soldiers and that includes a survivability position for the OP. Our training manuals dictate that stays of more than four hours require positions to be dug. So why don’t we enforce this tactic? Do we expect these soldiers to dash back to their vehicles while fragmentation is flying? How many think that we don’t need to practice that task?

You may argue that we will do it when the time comes, but we cannot afford to take that position. After all, we know that how we train is how we fight. If the good habit of building a fighting position is not developed in training, then it will not be

Digging a TOW fighting position at Fort Polk

practiced on the battlefield until it is too late. Vehicle crews sleeping in an assembly area or at an FMCP within artillery range need a place to go once the artillery begins to impact. Sleeping on the back of a tank or the seat of a 5-ton does not afford much protection. There may not be time to get inside the tank's protection. A simple survivability position can be the key to survival.

Key lessons were learned both times that construction of fighting positions was trained during my career. The first lesson was that our soldiers did not know how to perform the task. The second was that it was hard, time-consuming work. All involved were astonished at the amount of labor it took to build a position and the materials needed. In both of the training events, the task was made even easier because the soldiers were not working in a tactical environment. Their sole task was to dig the position to standard. The benefits of the exercise were innumerable. But the main goals accomplished were to show soldiers what "right" looks like and to give them practice on the task.

Certainly, terrain and weather dictate whether entrenchment will be easy or hard. Additionally, these factors also determine whether the hole will be relatively nice or a soggy mud pit. The main deficiency of the training I experienced was that it did not provide the soldiers with techniques to make their work easier. A study of past battlefields readily provides these techniques and offers ideas on what kinds of training our soldiers will need. For example, soldiers in World War II often used explosives to break up the frozen ground near the surface, thus allowing them to reach unfrozen soil in which they could dig. Others would use small arms to loosen up the soil before breaking out the spade. In training, few places allow us to detonate explosives to dig our holes. However, the more training we provide soldiers in garrison, the more prepared they will be on the battlefield.

Certainly, there are many who will disagree with my ideas. If we learn one thing from history and combat veterans, it should be that fighting positions save lives. Maybe further discussion on this subject will conclude that entrenchment is obsolete and unnecessary, although I don't believe that is the case. Maybe a conversation with some of the members of the Chechen militia will convince us of the need for digging in.



The finished product after ten hours of work.

Notes

¹Ambrose, Stephen E., *Citizen Soldiers: The U.S. Army from the Normandy Beaches to the Bulge to the Surrender of Germany June 7, 1944-May 7, 1945*, Simon & Schuster: New York, p. 254.

²Patton, George S., Jr., *War As I Knew It*, Houghton Mifflin Company: Boston, 1975, p. 261.

³Rommel, Erwin, *Infantry Attacks*, Presidio Press: California, 1990, p. 31.

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