By: James King

Large columns of dust rise up from the desert floor as a hundred T-80 tanks and BMPs are on the move. The commander of the Donovian Operational Strategic Command South (OSC-South) has just given the order to invade Atropia. Supported by separatist fighters from the Belusavar Freedom Brigade (BFB), their task is to seize key natural resources and annex the newly acquired territory. Standing in the way of the five mechanized divisions of the OSC-South is one United States Army division, one division from the United Kingdom, and one Atropian division. In other words, a thin line of defense exists against this near-peer competitor.

This is the situation units find themselves in when they arrive at the National Training Center. Developed by TRADOC, the Decisive Action Training Environment, a combination of Combined Arms Maneuver and Wide Area Security, in which units at NTC, JRTC, and JMRC come to train against was designed to bring the Army back to its roots after a decade and a half of fighting counterinsurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan. While there are many people within a rotational unit wearing combat patches on their right arm, few if any have experienced tank on tank combat operations and none have experienced a fight against a near-peer threat like the one they are about to face.

As RSOI passes and units move into their tactical assembly areas, even those that have been to Atropia before will come to find that this is a new experience. The enemy always puts the pressure on. Spoiling attacks happen daily to disrupt units as they prepare for operations. The Donovians have learned from previous units and no longer allow for lock step, plan, prepare, execute mission planning. Because of this, units must constantly be on the move. The ability to manage transitions plays a much larger roll than before.

The US Army is a learning organization too. Since NTC's first ever rotation in 2012, Army brigades have learned many lessons, that when properly applied, can help units rotating into theater get in the fight quicker and more effectively.

This is not your father's war

Many senior leaders have battle scars from the wars with the Kraznovian Army in the late '90s and early 2000s when they were young lieutenants and captains. Some of these leaders have come into Atropia expecting to face a similar force. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Kraznovian Army fought using old Soviet doctrine. This caused them to be lock step in their actions making them very predictable. While the Donovians, on the other hand, use similar equipment to the Kraznovians their tactics are very different. Anyone coming into a fight expecting old Soviet tactics will soon find themselves out maneuvered.

Donovian forces take doctrine from whatever source they see fit. As outlined in the Army's *TC 7-100* series of training manuals Donovian forces will even take pages from the doctrine of the US Army. This along with their use of Decision Point Tactics as outlined in CALL's *CTC Quarterly 97-4* make the Donovian Army a much less predictable adversary.

Unit Intelligence officers will serve themselves well to learn these new tactics by studying the above-mentioned references. Having a thorough understanding of how the enemy uses decision point tactics will allow him/her to break away from the binary "Most Likely" and "Most Dangerous" depictions of enemy operations and paint a true picture of what the enemy is capable of doing for the commander. This will allow the operations officer the opportunity to build a plan that addresses the enemy's options. This can potentially be used to shape what decisions the enemy makes. Doing this right can cause the enemy to make decisions that draws him into a unit's strong point.

You will be out gunned

Units coming to Atropia learn quickly that the Donovians rely heavily on artillery fire to disrupt US force operations. To the Donovians, mass is more important than accuracy. US

Forces are hard pressed to match the 100 plus round volleys that the Donovians have been known to use on key command nodes.

This tradeoff of accuracy for mass allows the Donovians to fire out to their max range. Knowing that US forces are tied to the need for precision fires, keeping them from planning for more than two thirds of their effective range, the Donovians have extended their artillery use out to its max range to avoid effective counter-fire. This has created a significant range overmatch between their systems and those found organically in a US Brigade Combat Team.

The overmatch achieved by extending to their max range causes significant issues with US Force counter-fire operations. The Donovian standard artillery piece, the 2S19 has a max range of 29km and a rocket assisted range of 36km both numbers put their systems out of the comfort zone of the US M777 and M109 systems. This will make most units reliant on Division assets to fill the gap. Using Division, however, takes time and the Donovians know it! They have become proficient at shooting and moving to reduce their exposure to counter-fire.

Donovian artillery forces can, however, become predicable. Armed with a sharp intelligence officer that can read the pattern of attacks, a good understanding of the terrain and how it affects where a firing battery can operate, and a good sensor to shooter linkage, a unit can be very successful at locating and destroying Donovian artillery.

UAVs will be used to target command nodes

The Donovians have been watching how we use UAVs for years. Until recently, their use of UAVs was considered primitive at best. With an upgrade from the Silver Fox small UAS to the larger Outlaw, Donovian Brigade Tactical Groups (BTG) have similar UAV capabilities to a US BCT. They are however limited in the number of hours their aircraft can fly in one day. Typically, a BTG will only fly their Outlaw four hours a day.

When they do fly, it is generally in search of a BCT's command nodes. This has historically been an easy task for Donovian units to accomplish. Living on FOBs in both Iraq and Afghanistan has allowed US forces' skills in camouflage to atrophy. This, along with the Donovians superior understanding of the terrain and all of the favorable positions for large command structures, has caused our nodes to stick out like a sore thumb in the deserts of Atropia.

Intelligence collected from captured Donovian leaders has indicated that they will not

initiate an indirect fire attack on something unless they have a good understanding of what it is. They do not want to risk exposing their assets to destroy a company command post if they can destroy a Brigade Support Area instead.

This makes the use of camouflage and other deception measures a vital part of a unit's Tactical SOP. A unit that can successfully conceal the location of their Brigade and Battalion TOCs will have a reduced chance of needing to jump to a new location before they are ready. This can keep a unit on a more effective Military Decision Making Process (MDMP) timeline and cause less disruptions to intelligence collection operations and analysis.

Unfortunately, unlike Donovian units which have a robust air defense network protecting its ground forces, there is little a BCT can do besides leverage camouflage to protect itself against enemy UAS and attack aviation. The lack of air defense assets at the BCT level has resulted in units attempting to use anti-tank missiles to shoot down helicopters. Fortunately, this unorthodox method of air defense has worked on occasion to bring down large helicopters like the Hind-D. With their small size and limited heat signature this technique has not been an effective countermeasure against the Donovian's Outlaw system.

The BFB and the Donovian conventional forces will work together

The Belosuvar Freedom Brigade or BFB is a separatist organization that is attempting to break Erdibil province from Atropia in order to be annexed by Donovia. Supplied by the criminal networks that run rampant in the province and trained by the Special Purpose Forces of the Donovian Army these insurgents wreak havoc on US Forces that don't take the time to protect their rear areas. The BFB are hard line fighters that can match up with any light infantry unit.

Working in conjunction with Donovian Special Purpose Forces, BFB units have seized key urban centers across the province. They have even been known to seize towns that are not known to be havens for ethnic Belosuvars. Once a town has been taken by the BFB it is extremely difficult to get it back. The BFB will strongpoint the entire town, creating interlocking layers of IEDs and ambushes, drawing units into narrow streets before attacking from multiple points.

By drawing US forces into towns, the BFB prevents them from using indirect fire and close air support on their locations. They know we are risk adverse to any collateral damage caused by firing into the town. Only on rare occasions will the BFB conduct a complex attack outside of a town, and those are generally against lightly defended logistic convoys. A target they know they can easily escape from.

BCTs with successful deployments to Atropia, typically get their forces into a town as quickly as possible. If they get in early enough, they can disrupt BFB activity and prevent their freedom of movement. This not only prevents BFB elements from controlling that town, it also restricts them from supporting their efforts in surrounding towns.

BCTs that simply isolate and bypass the urban centers, end up paying for it as the situation unfolds. These units typically focus on Donovian tanks and BMPs, wishing away the BFB problem. Doing this leaves a significant issue in the rear area that a Brigade Support Battalion is not equipped to deal with. BFB elements have been very effective against rear area operations and have been known to completely sever logistic lines of communications.

It's a race to Key Terrain

Ultimately, winning a battle in Erdibil province comes down to who holds the key terrain. From Granite Pass to Brown/Debman Pass to the Whale Gap, controlling the key terrain provides commanders an advantage that superior numbers cannot provide. Sometimes, however, what is key terrain for a particular battle may not stand out as such at first glance. For example, if a unit is defending the central corridor with an enemy to its east it will not be successful without first controlling both Granite and Bike Lake Passes. The same goes for defending the Whale Gap; for the defenders to have any chance of success, they must control Red Lake Pass.

For a unit's Intelligence officer who has spent most of his time working in a COIN environment prior to arriving in Atropia, determining key terrain may not be intuitive. The Donovian Army is counting on this being the case. They will look for any signs that a piece of terrain they know to be vital to their success might not be controlled. If they find key terrain open they will exploit it to the fullest extent possible.

Donovian Recon is everywhere and nowhere

As I previously mentioned, the Donovian Army has very limited UAS capabilities, which generally prevents them from flying for more than about four hours a day. They make up for this reduced capability with a very robust network of ground-based reconnaissance. A BTG will have access to some portion of the Division Tactical Group's (DTG) reconnaissance capabilities, which will be about 24 hours ahead of the attacking element's main body as well as their own organic reconnaissance which will be between eight and 12 hours ahead of the main body, generally moving in the period of darkness before an attack. In addition to conventional force reconnaissance operations, the Donovians also rely on information provided by BFB who can very easily move anywhere across the battlefield and report on US

Force locations without being detected.

Accurate and timely reporting from the reconnaissance assets working for the BTG is vital to the success of the Donovian commander's Decision Point Tactics. Destruction of these elements before they can report back to their commander can cause him to have to guess at the correct course of action to take. This reliance on reconnaissance to drive their decision-making, makes them susceptible to deception operations. Successful units have leveraged deception to the BTG commander right into the heart of a defense or cause him to spring his own defense earlier then desired causing his plan to be desynchronized.

Conclusion

Conventional combat operations have changed since the last time the US Army trained for tank on tank combat. Gone are the days of bypassing a civilian population because it was faster and easier. In the Decisive Action environment those population centers are just as much a key piece of terrain as the mountain pass or hill top. Units today have to deal with more than just the tank in front of them. If they don't, the person in civilian clothes will shoot them from behind with an anti-tank missile. Remembering this and the lessons above will go a long way towards a unit's successful deployment to Atropia.

Major James King is currently serving as the Executive Officer for a Military Intelligence Battalion at Fort Sam Houston, Texas. Prior to his current assignment he worked for 2 1/2 years as the S2 for a Striker Brigade in Alaska where he deployed to Atropia in Jan '15 for the only 18 day rotation and he just returned in Jan '17 from his most recent rotation. Major King has also worked at the National Training Center as a OC/T and Senario planner during NTC's transition to Decisive Action rotations.

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