

Urban Operations: Future War

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THE VILLAGE was about 15 kilometers away and there were 70 to 90 enemy soldiers in it. The battalion intelligence officer knew that for sure. He also knew they had some heavy machineguns, engineer support, antipersonnel and antitank mines and mortars. The division intelligence report said the civilian population had left. It would take three days for the battalion to prepare, move and launch an attack. The enemy would have that time to prepare a defense.

The battalion task force had 600 infantry soldiers, one engineer and three 81mm mortar platoons plus a 4.2-inch mortar, a 105mm howitzer battery in direct support, two Stinger air defense sections and a platoon of tanks. The infantry soldiers were specially trained in urban warfare and were confident that they could easily take the village. The only real problem was the fight across the distance separating them from the village which took its toll. By the time the unit reached the outskirts of the village on the evening of the third day, the enemy had inflicted significant casualties on the battalion. The enemy had killed or captured the battalion scouts as well. The latest information showed the enemy strength unchanged. The battalion would launch its attack the next morning with about 300 infantrymen. The odds were still better than three to one.

The next morning, 30 minutes before daylight, the battalion attacked. The tank platoon could not move into the village because mines and other obstacles blocked all of the roads and approaches a tank could use. They could support by fire from about a kilometer away but were exposed. Within minutes of launching the attack, there was so much smoke and confusion that the tanks could not fire at all. In their exposed posi-

tion they were vulnerable and soon fell victim to antitank fire from the village.

The battalion breached the outer obstacles and began moving into the first two buildings. However, they took many casualties during the breach as the enemy began hitting them with mortars. The attacking soldiers were in the open, the enemy forces were in buildings. As soldiers were hit, a medic or combat lifesaver moved quickly to their side and began first aid. Rapidly, other soldiers would move to carry the wounded soldier out of the street and the line of fire. There were more casualties among these soldiers. The attack was slowing dramatically.

In an hour of hard fighting, the battalion was able to secure five buildings, but the attack had completely stalled. The battalion could not generate enough power to move further; it had run out of soldiers. The enemy still had almost all of its soldiers and began to mount counterattacks. Artillery was of no use, because the two sides were separated by only a few meters within the narrow streets of the city.

It was December 1990, and the place was the Combat Maneuver Training Center, Hohenfels, Germany. While the Cold War concerns that generated this kind of exercise in preparation for war in Central Europe were ending in 1990, a host of new and demanding security challenges—for which such training was equally relevant—were beginning to emerge. In this regard, the exercise aptly illustrated the kinds of military problems and complexities that promise to confront modern armies throughout the remainder of this decade and into the next century. On 4 October 1993, the US and Russian armies marked a particularly relevant day for modern urban warfare with combat operations unfolding; for the US Army it was hostilities in Somalia; and for the Russian army it was reasserting control in Moscow.

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The US, German and Russian armies experienced extensive city fights during World War II, with the German and Russian armies sustaining significant losses in the fight for Stalingrad.¹ As a result of this and other battles in World War II, the Soviet army sought to avoid fighting in cities and told its commanders to bypass large urban areas whenever possible. Today, the Russian army has acknowledged the increased possibility and even the need to fight in cities and large towns. However, Russian tacticians, in developing new combined arms urban defense techniques, have emphasized defending forward or on the edge of cities and "striking the enemy at the farthest point from the battalion defensive area."² This technique allows the Russian combined arms team to use its superior firepower and armor from *outside* the city and takes no accounting for the presence of civilians or the need to preserve infrastructure. The Russian army has demonstrated in the various ethnic conflicts that have erupted within the former Soviet Union, and most recently in the streets of Moscow, a continuation of the combined arms approach to urban warfare and appears not to differentiate levels of combat or account for strict definitions of rules of engagement (ROE).

Army doctrine also recommends that maneuvering forces bypass cities.³ Commanders and military professionals do not want to fight in villages, towns or cities. However, the US military will fight in cities and towns, and there are significant differences between urban warfare and classic maneuver warfare that every military leader must understand, comprehend and to which he must be able to immediately adjust. Many of the combat multipliers—artillery, mortars, close air support, electronic warfare and the speed and shock effect associated with fast-moving armored forces—are greatly reduced or entirely eliminated in cities.

Army units are now fighting in urban areas. Furthermore, urban combat will become more frequent in the future. To be effective and to save soldiers' lives, commanders, planners and leaders throughout the chain of command must understand and practice this kind of warfare. The US military has prepared, fought and trained for combined arms maneuver warfare for the past 90 years but also has a wealth of urban combat experience. However, while this body of historical experience exists, current training does not specifically address that experience or prepare soldiers and leaders for any of the unique challenges associated with urban combat. Commanders and leaders must develop effective tactics for all levels of urban conflict and combat, test those tactics and task organizations at training centers to validate their utility and then inculcate the lessons learned in the tactical and operational body of the military.

There are a variety of reasons why an army fights in a city: It may be a vital port with free access to critical lines of communication; It may be located between two natural obstacles denying a maneuvering army the possibility to bypass; It may be the only place the enemy is actually located; There may be overwhelming political considerations that dominate the military decision or, in the case of operations other than war, the entire mission and focus may be centered in a city.⁴ Finally, however, one must consider that the populations of all nations are urbanizing. No army can fight in the future without conducting some or all of its combat operations in cities. In fact, it is quite possible that the majority of future combat will take place in and around urban areas. The great majority of fighting in the former Yugoslavia for example, is centered in and around cities and towns.⁵

The Army will find itself operating in cities in various parts of the world. It is currently engaged in combat in Somalia, nation assistance in Haiti and continues to teeter on the edge of involvement in Sarajevo and in other cities and towns of Bosnia. Urban warfare is the face of future war.

Defining Urban Warfare

Traditional definitions associated with maneuver warfare do not adequately address the spectrum of urban combat. First, there are only two levels of urban combat: low intensity and high

intensity. What complicates understanding the essence of this warfare is the breadth of the spectrum in the low-intensity category.

High-intensity urban combat differs from the traditional maneuver warfare definition in that it does not include nuclear weapons. Their use in an urban environment rapidly and fundamentally changes that environment to another category. What was once three dimensional becomes two dimensional. Ground forces entering combat under these conditions are not engaged in urban combat, but are fighting maneuver warfare.⁶

In operations other than war, particularly those that are centered in urban areas, the spectrum of military involvement is broader than that associated with more traditional warfare. That spectrum may range from low-level civil affairs and nation assistance operations in which there are no combat soldiers, to peacemaking and peace enforcement operations that involve the use of all parts of the combined arms team. The parameters that define these operations are:

- Mission.
- Political situation within the area of operations.
- Presence of large numbers of civilians.
- ROE with respect to those civilians.
- Buildings and infrastructure of the city.
- Desired end state of the operation.

It is of ultimate importance for military planners and commanders to understand the point within the spectrum at which they initiate the operation, are currently engaged and which direction on the continuum of combat operations, from more to less, the operation is moving. Understanding this enables them to determine force structure, tactical considerations and the entire campaign plan with its long-term end-state considerations. Once understood, it is then incumbent upon those leaders to ensure that the above come together at the right time and place.

High-Intensity Urban Combat

For the most part, current Russian, German, British and US manuals adequately address high-intensity urban combat. The combined arms team of tanks, mechanized infantry, artillery in the direct-fire role and heavy engineer support worked in the past, and it will work in the future. At this level of declared warfare, one is able to



Scenes from the vicious street fighting in the center of Berlin April-May 1945

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Soldiers of the 83d Infantry Division move cautiously through the streets of St. Malo, France, 8 August 1944. Note the spent shell casings on the pavement.

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distinguish who and where the enemy is, and the ROEs allow for the wholesale destruction of buildings and other elements of the city's infrastructure. The civilian population is not a factor, either because it has abandoned the city or because the civilians are hostile and are part of the enemy support structure.

Commanders of all armies want to avoid this kind of warfare. It is enormously costly in terms of soldiers and equipment. It causes a loss of mobility and dramatically slows the rapid advance associated with open maneuver warfare. But the reality is that the present geographic and strategic landscape, and that of the future, will force combat into urban areas.

While current manuals adequately address the tactics for fighting a high-intensity urban operation, there is a lack of emphasis on certain key elements within literature and particularly in training.

High-intensity urban combat requires an enormous number of soldiers. The very nature of attacking, clearing and securing an urban area takes a huge number of soldiers. There is no substitute; no easier, less costly method. Tanks, infantry fighting vehicles and other equipment simply cannot do the job. The compartmentalization and restrictiveness of any city requires that individual soldiers physically secure, clear, occupy and observe buildings, alleys, courtyards, basements, sewers, and so forth. Commanders engaging in urban combat must assign objectives that will seem ridiculously small in terms of area and number of enemy. (Perhaps five times smaller than for the same size force in open terrain.) US Army Field Manual 90-10-1, *An Infantryman's Guide to Urban Combat*, states that for urban combat, an attacking force should have from three to five times the number of soldiers it would need to attack the same objective in

open terrain. What this means in real terms is that instead of the maneuver warfare doctrinal ratio of three-to-one for an attacking force routinely used and universally understood by every task force commander at every US training center, now a US force should have nine to 15 soldiers for each enemy defender. Most maneuver task force commanders understand what it takes to attack an objective in open terrain, but even experienced commanders with a rotation or two at a combat training center (CTC) probably do not fully comprehend the requirements for urban combat.

Additionally, commanders must redefine their expectations about how combat will unfold, and understand that regardless of how fast they want or expect the battle or mission to progress based on their experience from traditional maneuver warfare, urban warfare will move at an agonizingly slow pace in comparison. Urban combat is truly three dimensional. Maneuver commanders, who typically think in two dimensions when planning and conducting operations, will find themselves frustrated. They will not intuitively consider the need to fight up and down within the same area of operations. Nor will they readily comprehend the mathematics associated with each incremental increase in size, height and depth of buildings and underground structures. Finally, as the experience and sophistication of the defender increase, the pace of urban warfare will decrease even more.⁷

While US doctrine adequately addresses the special requirements for task organization and the importance of the combined arms team, it does not clearly emphasize frontages and depths for attacking forces. Specifically, commanders need a guide to determine the number of task forces to attack, clear and secure a town or a portion of a city. Experience from past wars, coupled with lessons learned from hundreds of rotations at the CTCs, has provided Army planners and leaders with the answer to this question for maneuver warfare. The Army lacks the same repetitive experience for urban combat. Instead, it routinely avoids the problem. Do not fight in cities, bypass them.

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A Marine provides security during a search for contraband weapons in Mogadishu's Bakara Market, circa January 1993.



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squad can field seven dismounted infantrymen if it leaves the driver and gunner with the vehicle. This means that based on the physical requirements for clearing and securing buildings, one Bradley squad at 100-percent strength can clear and secure one two-story, five- or six-room building.

At the same time, a standard US Marine Corps squad can field 13 dismounted Marines for the mission (almost twice as many as a Bradley unit). These numbers are significant for urban warfare. Planners must consider that it may take two

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Bradley battalions to attack, clear and secure an objective that would require one Marine battalion. Admittedly, this does not account for the very significant role the Bradley may be able to play, or other considerations such as the sophistication of the defense, the condition of the infrastructure of the city, and so on. But the nature of urban warfare will reduce the speed, mobility and firepower of the vehicle and, in many cases, completely eliminate its potential. Rubble, natural and man-made obstacles, mines, the restrictiveness associated with the need to travel exclusively on city streets and other antiarmor threats make the vehicle particularly vulnerable. In the end, it will be foot soldiers who have to clear and secure each pile of rubble and each building.

Furthermore, in urban combat a unit cannot "secure" an area by observation and fire. Securing buildings requires that units leave soldiers in those buildings until friendly forces clear the entire town or city. Leaving teams and squads to secure buildings rapidly depletes combat power. Add to this the presence of civilians and enemy prisoners of war, and the need for individual soldiers expands exponentially.

Low-Intensity Urban Conflict and Tactics

Armies train for high-intensity urban and maneuver warfare but more often engage in low-intensity urban warfare. This is war in the near term. As the Army moves toward the 21st century, it will become increasingly involved in hostilities in cities throughout the world. As Colonel Roger Trinquier wrote more than two decades ago, "It is accepted that the final stake of *modern warfare* is the control of the populace. The army

should therefore make its main effort in those areas where the population is densest; that is, in the cities."⁸ New US military strategy, coupled with the realities of the post-Cold War world, will force the United States, as the world's only superpower, into the leadership role in peace-keeping, peacemaking, peace enforcement and humanitarian relief operations. The most recent NATO strategic concept emphasizes, "In these new circumstances there are increased opportunities for the successful resolution of crises at an early stage."⁹ Current events strongly suggest that these operations will take place in cities. They will involve complicated ROEs, large numbers of civilians and the need to preserve and even reconstruct the infrastructure. The doctrine, tactics and training on these kinds of operations are inadequate.

Tactics. In low-intensity warfare, the Army has enormous advantages in firepower, mobility, logistics, communications and intelligence collection. All of these can be disadvantages as well.

One of the first lessons the 10th Mountain Division, Fort Drum, New York, learned upon its deployment to Somalia was that it could not use its artillery.¹⁰ Although the initial mission made its use seem unlikely, for most maneuver commanders the absence of artillery support is very uncomfortable. Artillery is a commander's single most important combat multiplier. Commanders routinely depend on artillery to weaken or destroy enemy defenses before an attack and to help units to break contact. Further, it is standard urban tactics to use large weapons and weapon systems to make entrance and exit holes into buildings to avoid doors and windows that the enemy can easily booby trap. The ROEs for these kinds of operations take the assets away. The same rules strip away close air support and attack helicopters as well. Army commanders and leaders train hard to achieve the synchronization of these very powerful assets and then, suddenly, they are no longer part of the equation. Rapidly, the low-intensity urban environment reduces the significant Army advantage in combat power to equal those it would fight.

The Army, however, does have advantages that no unsophisticated urban insurgent or guerrilla can duplicate or that the special restrictiveness associated with urban terrain and ROEs can negate. The Army has money, equipment,