



Opposing force (OPFOR) soldiers engage friendly forces during a decisive action training environment exercise at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) in Fort Johnson, Louisiana, 25 April 2014. Paratroopers with 1st Battalion, 509th Infantry Regiment (Airborne), provide near-peer military, insurgent, and criminal OPFOR at the JRTC. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Christopher Klutts, 20th Public Affairs Detachment)

We Need More Professional OPFOR

Dedicated Professional Opposing Forces at Home Station Are an Asymmetric Advantage

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In a conversation between you and your boss about an upcoming opposing force (OPFOR) tasking, your boss states,

Next week, you and your unit are going to be OPFOR for 2nd Battalion. Here is a CONOP [concept of the operation] with a list of their training objectives. It should be pretty easy. Wear OPFOR uniforms, build and occupy your lanes, listen to the OC/Ts [observer-controller/trainers] who are running the lanes, participate in the AARs [after action reviews], get some training value for your soldiers, and above all, make sure your soldiers know that we are there to facilitate 2nd Battalion in getting after their training objectives.

Here's how that translates in your mind:

- OPFOR uniforms—Turn your uniform tops inside out (or something similar).
- Build and occupy your lanes—There will be objectives, but they will be low quality, like a camo net with chairs.
- Listen to the OC/Ts—They will tell you to go even easier if the unit is struggling.
- Participate in the AARs—Possibly the most (maybe even the only) valuable thing you will do that week.
- Get training value for your soldiers—Your unit will probably get nothing out of this but try to solve this problem if you can.
- Facilitate the other unit's training objectives—Fight like amateurs, probably dying in place if you are in the defense or being obvious if you are in the offense.

Our doctrine notes that our OPFOR program should provide “an uncompromising sparring partner.”¹ A sparring partner should test you and advance you to a level of mastery that you cannot achieve on your own. Critically, a sparring partner offers the opportunity to experiment; your success against them in practice can lead to real advantages against real adversaries. Likewise, an uncompromising sparring partner should help you rapidly see which experiments do not work, and they should show you by exploiting your weakness the way a real adversary can. In contrast, a poor sparring partner reinforces bad habits, simulates an unthinking opponent, impedes your true potential, and gets as little value from the partnership as you do. A poor sparring partner sounds like the typical home station OPFOR.

When it comes to home station training, the above model appears to be the most common in the Army, and it is a terrible model. It is the most common because it is easy; anyone can play dumb and rise to mediocrity. Would you look forward to being OPFOR and practicing bad habits? If you were the blue force (BLUFOR), you may be able to achieve your training objectives, but are you fighting another professional force or a force designed to cater to your training needs? There are examples of highly professional OPFOR with the resources to replicate dynamic operational environments (OEs)—such as the National Training Center (NTC). However, home stations do not have such OPFORs. We can change this.

This article proposes two things: (1) *a scalable model for dedicated professional OPFOR at home station to change the paradigm* by actually looking and fighting like a serious sparring partner who receives value from being OPFOR and provides a better experience for BLUFOR; and (2) *changes to Army Regulation (AR) 350-2, Operational Environment and Opposing Force Program*, the governing regulation that is stifling training as we should fight.

Before we discuss the possible solution, we need to understand the bigger picture. Why did the U.S. Army create professional OPFOR at our combat training centers (CTCs)? What does our current doctrine tell us that our home station OPFOR should look like?

Recent History of U.S. Army OPFOR

It is incredibly ironic that the highly professional OPFOR of NTC was created because the prevailing OPFOR model that preceded it was precisely the type described in the conversation between you and your boss. Between 1967 and 1976, Field Manual (FM) 105-5, *Maneuver Control*, provided the foundation for a generic OPFOR with no nationality but who spoke the fictional Esperanto language.² But, “although the intelligence

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An opposing force surrogate vehicle from Hawk Troop, 2nd Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, maneuvers through the desert during National Training Center rotation 17-01, at Fort Irwin, California, 7 October 2016. The vehicle is designed to replicate a Russian BMP fighting vehicle, adding to the realism of training achieved at combat training centers. (Photo by Sgt. David Edge, U.S. Army)

community provided information on aggressor tactics, aggressor troops fought like Americans in strange clothing and were almost always outnumbered and defeated by American forces. As one student of the OPFOR put it, “it smacked a lot of cowboys and Indians, with very stupid, indolent Indians.”³

Fortunately, this practice ended in 1976, when new doctrine did away with the vague, nationless OPFOR and instead patterned them to mimic potential Warsaw Pact opponents.⁴ A special “Red Thrust” school was established to train the new OPFOR, where new OPFOR soldiers “ate, slept, and lived like Soviet soldiers.”⁵ At Red Thrust, “using Soviet Army manuals, soldiers learned formations, tactics, methods of attack and counterattack, Soviet unit organization, weapons identification, and command and control procedures.”⁶ The combination of new doctrine and immersion in understanding potential adversaries enabled the NTC to offer an incredibly capable and dedicated professional OPFOR since it became operational in 1982.⁷

The 1991 Gulf War demonstrated the value of a dedicated professional OPFOR sparring partner. Most

American forces in that conflict had rotated through the NTC at some point, providing us with an asymmetric advantage.⁸ Yet the success of the OPFOR at the CTCs ironically led many home station OPFORs to atrophy and to recreate the poor sparring partner that the CTCs sought to eliminate. We seem to have a case where “today’s problems come from yesterday’s ‘solutions.’”⁹

Current State: What Doctrine Says

We now know that the poor state of home station OPFOR led to reform in the 1970s and 1980s that produced the exceptional OPFOR of our CTCs. But what does doctrine say now of OPFOR? Our guiding doctrine for OPFOR and OE comes from AR 350-2. As the name implies, it “covers all Army OE and OPFOR activities in live, virtual, constructive, and gaming environments across the operational and institutional domains in support of leader development, training, education, and other developmental functions.”¹⁰ This regulation governs CTCs, home stations, and smaller programs like the OPFOR for the Airborne and Ranger

Table. Summary of the Three Levels of Operational Environment (OE) Fidelity

Fidelity Level	Associated Program	Echelon	Description
High	Combat Training Centers	Multi	Replicates most of the complexities of the OE, including realistic effects, designed to produce "ill-structured problems"
Medium	Regional Collective Training Capability	Multi	Reduced OE but still simulates most complexities
Low	Home state	Single	Low resource requirement to replicate the OE

(Table by author, based on material from Army Regulation 350-2, *Operational Environment and Opposing Force Program*)

Training Brigade and applies to both the Active and Reserve Components.¹¹

AR 350-2 notes that "the use of OPFOR in training events is intended to improve realistic training by enabling operations against a noncooperative, free-thinking, and capability-based adversary or enemy."¹² Home station program should enable

live/constructive training capability supporting decisive action tasks for both CAM [combined arms maneuver] and WAS [wide area security] with a borrowed military manpower OPFOR from platoon through battalion level, capable of supporting live training for company proficiency up to battalion maneuver, and live/constructive up to brigade and division elements.¹³

As noted at the beginning of this section, AR 350-2 also applies to the OE that the OPFOR operates within and how that OE enables leader development. The table summarizes the three fidelity levels and their application.

Further, all OPFOR and OE programs need to be accredited or validated (depending on the type of program) to ensure each "provides appropriate training conditions, maintains credibility as a training aid, and achieves desired objectives and outcomes."¹⁴ The U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) G-2 provides the accreditation/validation: home station programs are validated, and all others are accredited. Fortunately, the validation process for home station programs appears to have flexibility, with AR 350-2 noting,

These validations will mimic the accreditation process, but are not accreditations due to the multi-faceted variations in expected training

objectives, anticipated outcomes, and limited resources that make it implausible for establishing common standards. Rather, TRADOC, G2 will provide a written assessment of observations, discussions, and recommendations to training unit commanders, senior trainers, and the FORSCOM [Forces Command] G3/5/7 and DCG [deputy commanding general], and furnish a copy to the DCG, CAC-T [Combined Arms Center-Training].¹⁵

The intent behind AR 350-2 is well-meaning to ensure that BLUFOR receives a quality sparring partner that accurately mimics foreign military units and real OEs. However, the validation process is intimidating, making experimentation with a professional home station OPFOR and the external scrutinization unappealing.

Professional Home Station OPFOR Model

The value of professional OPFOR, a true sparring partner that produces an asymmetric advantage, is well understood across our profession. But, as noted in the historical discussion, the success of the CTC OPFORs has re-created the original issue with home station OPFOR, and the regulations for home station seem to discourage creating enduring programs. We need a model to spur discussion on what a professional dedicated home station OPFOR should look like and how AR 350-2 can be changed to incentivize it. We will tackle them in that order.

I propose a unit dedicated to being OPFOR that a division, brigade, or battalion could create independently. Clearly, there would be differences between such units at, say, Fort Carson and Fort Campbell

	Arms	Immersion in Adversary Role
Best Platinum	<p>Combined Arms Task Force (from Gold) with electronic warfare, unmanned aircraft systems, and rotary aviation</p> <p>Task organized after the specific adversary</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adversary: Replicate a specific potential adversary (e.g., China) • Tactics: 100 percent align with chosen adversary • Command and Control (C2)/Planning/Decision-Making: Adversary • Visual Modifications/Uniforms: Full visual modification to vehicles, distinctive OPFOR uniforms
Better Gold	<p>Combined Arms Task Force (infantry, with armor if needed, reconnaissance, engineers, and fires)</p> <p>Task organized after the specific adversary</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adversary: Replicate a specific national adversary (e.g., China) • Tactics: Still use American tactics • C2/Planning/Decision-Making: Adversary • Visual Modifications/Uniforms: Distinctive OPFOR uniforms
Good Silver	<p>Infantry unit</p> <p>Nonprofessional opposing force (OPFOR) units attached as needed</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adversary: Generic OPFOR • Tactics: Still use American tactics • C2/Planning/Decision-Making: American • Visual Modifications/Uniforms: Distinctive OPFOR uniforms

(Figure by author)

Figure 1. Example Good/Better/Best Methodology for Professional Home Station Opposing Force

or between the Pennsylvania and Oregon National Guards, but the concept can apply across the Active and Reserve Components. I believe that a unit two echelons down will provide enough combat power without consuming too large a percentage of the parent unit: for example, a brigade combat team would create a company-size professional OPFOR. Augment with enablers as needed—see figure 1 for examples.

Advantages

Experimentation. How do we discover ways to overcome an adversary and win? No matter your theory of victory, the theory needs to be tested. At CTCs, the pressure is high, and external evaluation and limited repetitions combine to reduce the incentive to experiment. A robust and professional home station OPFOR, especially one aligned with the platinum standard in figure 1, provides the opportunity to learn how to defeat a specific adversary's tactics (as we understand their doctrine).

Better CTC preparation. A CTC's world-class OPFOR is renowned for routinely besting far larger BLUFOR units. If you are already accustomed to fighting a comparable force at your home station, you will be in far better position to win. Instead of the OPFOR always surprising you, you can have the chance to surprise them by better anticipating their tactics and knowing how to defeat them (because you have already experimented). Further, a greater understanding will lower your risk to mission (for the training scenarios inside the CTC), allowing you to assume risk elsewhere and contributing to your ability to potentially surprise the OPFOR. All of this will cumulatively add to a better CTC rotation and, hence, better preparation for real-life large-scale combat operations (LSCO) (see figure 2).

Better quality lanes and OE. If being OPFOR is their job, and being great at your job is the expectation, then there is the potential for them to astonish you. Let them construct great lanes and replicate the aspects of the OE. Instead of a command post being a camo net



(Figure by author)

Figure 2. Advantages

with two folding chairs and an orange water cooler, have the OPFOR unit really place a command post. A mortar firing point can have real mortars rather than a plastic pipe, and that position can defend itself with its mortars, machine guns, etc. (obviously no live ammo). As noted in the table, AR 350-2 is okay with low-fidelity OEs for home station training. It provides home station OPFOR flexibility for when time and resources are short but enables them to create realism when time and resources are available.

Spread knowledge on potential adversaries throughout your force. Not only will all the non-OPFOR gain a better understanding of potential adversaries, but the personnel that rotate out of the dedicated professional OPFOR will also diffuse knowledge throughout the force as they rotate.

Learn the weaknesses in your tactics and structures. Not only can you learn about potential adversaries, but because you will have a natural relationship with your sparring partner, they can also teach you about yourself. The CTCs sort of provide this through OC/Ts, but that is the view of an outside observer, not someone trying to beat you. Maximize that relationship with your sparring partner; let the dedicated professional OPFOR critique you during rehearsals, telling you exactly what they will do in response to your actions. Let them show you during the AAR how they emplaced their security and why that gave them an advantage. Let them hone your edge.

Enhance opportunities for broadening our profession. Time in the home station OPFOR will broaden your soldiers, like rotating between a rifle company and weapons company in the same battalion. This is especially true for the Reserve Components whose soldiers have far fewer opportunities for broadening within their career field because their state only has an armored brigade, an infantry brigade, or something similar.

Misconceptions, Disadvantages, and Mitigations

Life requires choices, some with trade-offs, and some things that look like trade-offs are not. The good news is that creativity generally provides mitigations.

The dedicated OPFOR unit will be unable to train on its mission-essential tasks. False. While spending more time as the supporting unit rather than the supported unit disadvantages the dedicated OPFOR unit, creativity can solve this. Can the OPFOR not execute an attack or an area defense as the supporting unit? Training scenarios can be specifically written to provide the OPFOR the opportunity to be evaluated while still being the supporting unit (especially if they are free-thinking, and free to win). Alternatively, the OPFOR can take a turn being the supported unit for the purpose of their training and evaluation on a mission-essential task.

The professional OPFOR unit will lose its interoperability with sister units. False. Instead, their

interchangeability with like units could be reduced since they will not be mirror images of the other subordinate units. They will remain interoperable since they will still be an American unit that maintains all their institutional knowledge on our processes and how we fight. At worst, if you must conduct real-life LSCO and do not have time to transition the OPFOR back to a standard American unit, they will be akin to an allied unit that perfectly understands the U.S. Army.

It is a big undertaking. True. When you do this, you will break the paradigm, and your staff will have to figure things out. It will take time and material if you want to do the visual modifications. Actually learning Chinese or other doctrine will require the investment of a lot of time and training. Following the Platinum-Gold-Silver methodology for building options is probably a good idea. But, it is 100 percent achievable if you are committed to “solving for yes.”

Other Ways to Improve Your Professional Home Station OPFOR

You have committed to the concept—perfect. Here are some other things you can do to make them more effective.

Free-thinking OPFOR. Unleash the intellect of the OPFOR to fight as an intelligent sparring partner that mimics the doctrine of the intended potential adversary. BLUFOR should be thinking of ways to outwit the OPFOR while avoiding OPFOR traps, and this requires both partners to be free-thinking. An OPFOR that can learn from success and failure in each iteration of an exercise will help you learn from yours. Importantly, this is how AR 350-2 wants the OPFOR to behave: “Both forces execute their mission with the least possible constraints, allowing events to move along their natural course, enabling commanders to realize the full consequences of their decisions within the bounds of the scenario and exercise director’s guidance to meet training objectives.”¹⁶

Free-to-win OPFOR. Defeat can be a fantastic teacher, and it fuels the determination of true professionals. Defeat exposes problems that get overlooked in victory, and a critical eye will also find successes that need to be retained, modified, or shared. Professional athletes and sports teams do this, including practice with sparring partners. They do it because money,

fame, and professional careers are on the line; we should do it because our lives may be on the line.

Like a free-thinking OPFOR, AR 350-2 also wants the OPFOR to be free to win, with scenarios “structured for maximum free play, including an opportunity for the OPFOR to ‘win’ the fight.”¹⁷

Get rid of traditional force ratios. FM 5-0, *Planning and Orders Production*, has the long-standing list of recommended planning ratios used by our profession.¹⁸ The time and place to be bold and train for uncertainty is against home station OPFOR. In future LSCO, desirable ratios are likely to exist only for brief periods, and training as if they will magically be common will fool us into a false sense of certainty. Those idealized ratios may never occur against a massive potential adversary like China, and even building up parity with smaller potential adversaries will likely take months. Conditioning ourselves to those ratios could lead to decision paralysis, which would hand initiative to the enemy and prevent us from seizing brief windows of opportunity.

Closely matched forces are a far better experience for force-on-force. Taking this a step further, we know that fighting outnumbered is highly plausible, especially early in potential future conflicts. FM 3-0, *Operations*, notes that “forward-positioned forces must be prepared to fight outnumbered and from exposed terrain.”¹⁹ No force wants this scenario in real LSCO, but all need to be prepared for the type of conflict we do not want to fight. Encirclement is a frightening possibility but also something we cannot wish away. What better way to train for this possibility than with your sparring partner. Learning to routinely win in training against a free-thinking sparring partner, modeled on potential adversaries, of comparable or greater size and capabilities than us, is the ideal way to learn to beat real adversaries if they ever align with the recommended ratios.

Interestingly, NTC’s OPFOR was originally larger than rotational BLUFOR, and they were augmented by temporary OPFOR to further disadvantage BLUFOR because that is how we expected to fight the Warsaw Pact forces.²⁰ Hence, the force ratio paradigm that we have become obsessed with in recent years has not always been part of our Army’s culture. Home station force-on-force provides the most forgiving opportunity for experimentation: we can use new tactics and task

organizations, attempt deception against a thinking opponent, and not taking advantage of this opportunity is a waste of our potential.

Remember, you can turn these features on and off as you need.

Recommended Changes to AR 350-2

One possible operational approach is to rewrite AR 350-2 to remove control over OPFOR and the OE at home station. While this would enable experimentation, it has the potential for home station programs to run wild. We need some middle ground between no regulation and potentially stifling but good meaning regulation. Our end state for AR 350-2 should include revised language for the validation process that would make the TRADOC G-2 a partner to operational units as they create programs.

This revised language should include a discussion on the responsibilities of the TRADOC G-2 to operational units standing up professional OPFOR and a timeline for the earliest that validations could occur. The responsibilities of the TRADOC G-2 to home station programs need to be included to make it a clear partner to units. A timeline for the earliest validation should be included so that home station programs have time to mature before formal evaluation.

Ultimately, whether the Army is best served with a very specific or very general description of responsibilities, timelines, and other criteria is something to explore through action. We need the TRADOC G-2 and pilot programs for the professional home stations to jointly develop a process and change AR 350-2 based on the results of the experiment. To achieve this, one side, the TRADOC G-2 or an ambitious unit in the operational force, will have to make the first move.

Conclusion

The common paradigm of home station OPFOR is a disservice to the units pretending to be OPFOR, does not provide the realism or quality that BLUFOR needs, and does not help diffuse real knowledge about potential adversaries into our Army. It is a disservice to the units tasked with being OPFOR since they often struggle to get any value, and they are pretending because they are not real OPFOR, and they only know American ways. They are frequently so constrained by the nature of the lanes and OC/Ts that they often end

up doing things that make no tactical sense but help provide a “good rep” for the BLUFOR.

Because of those constraints, the OPFOR does not know how to think and act like any of our real potential adversaries. Similarly, because the emphasis is usually lacking for building quality OEs, the BLUFOR do not get the training they deserve. Further, since OPFOR does not know how to use the tactics, task organization, and other aspects of any of our potential adversaries, both BLUFOR and OPFOR may be better off if we drop the charade of home station OPFOR pretending not to be American. The dedicated professional home station OPFOR is a better way.

The model presented in figure 1 of this article is a solid nucleus for visualizing the concept and then operationalizing it into reality. The platinum level best gets after replicating a CTC at home station, but it may not be the most achievable initially—you may need to start at silver and work to platinum.

Achieving this superior OPFOR has many advantages. You can experiment until you get it right and find flaws in your own tactics and in a potential adversary’s. It will better prepare you for a CTC rotation by increasing your odds of gaining and maintaining the initiative, allowing better risk taking by reducing uncertainty, which will give you far better odds of winning. Relatedly, you should empower your superior OPFOR to provide better lanes and better replicate the operational environment. Knowledge of our potential adversaries will diffuse through the force as soldiers rotate through the OPFOR. Combining that with making the OPFOR unit a quasi-broadening assignment within your formation can spread that knowledge insurgency throughout your formation.

This approach has potential trade-offs, but most, if not all, can be mitigated. The OPFOR can still train on mission-essential tasks—for instance, have them attack or defend against BLUFOR. They will not lose their interoperability since they will still be American soldiers whose native mindset will be American. While this is certainly a big endeavor, it is all achievable if you have the will for a better training experience.

To enable this concept, AR 350-2 will likely need changes. The validation process for home station, which mimics the highly encompassing accreditation process for the CTCs, is daunting. Further, having the results of the validation reported to elements in the U.S. Army Forces

Command, the Combined Arms Center-Training, and elsewhere seems unappealing for home station programs that need time to experiment and tailor the concept to their unit. AR 350-2 will likely need to be revised, but the ultimate form of those revisions should make the TRADOC G-2 a partner to ambitious units, with time for programs to mature before enduring a reported validation. Lastly, the revised wording for AR 350-2 should come after a pilot program with an operational unit.

There is limitless opportunity for elevating home station OPFOR, and options include making them free thinking, free to win, and getting rid of traditional force ratios. A free-thinking OPFOR is a better experience since no exercise director or OC/Ts are running around constraining adversaries in real life. Likewise, both sides have the potential to win in real life, and you can learn even more when you lose. For force ratios, what do we do in real life if we do not have the ratios that meet or exceed the planning factors in FM 5-0? If we can learn to win despite force ratios, then we will be in position to win when they are in our favor.

We need more professional OPFOR in both senses of the meaning. We need more units of professional

dedicated OPFOR since we should not rely on the CTCs and similar being our only source; we need comparable professional formations at home station. We also need our OPFOR at home station to be more professional than they are now so that the BLUFOR units get the experience they deserve and so that the OPFOR can really get value out of the experience. The world-class OPFOR of the CTCs was created because previous home station programs were lacking, and ironically, the success of the CTC OPFOR has re-created the problem with home station OPFOR. The world-class OPFOR at the CTCs is an asymmetric advantage for the U.S. Army, and we need to expand that advantage and regain true sparring partners at home stations. ■

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Notes

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