Combat Lessons Bulletin

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Convoy Security

Logistical convoys are lucrative targets for enemy interdiction. Because convoys are vulnerable to enemy ambushes and essential to the success of US operations, we must continually review convoy procedures and seek means of defeating enemy attacks against them. The following discussion concerns a study of this problem and the development of counterambush procedures made by the 25th Infantry Division.

Synopsis

The ambush of an 88 vehicle convoy in August 1968 disclosed the need for a thorough reappraisal of convoy counterambush procedures. An analysis of that ambush clearly indicated that the march units (44 vehicles each) were too large for adequate control and supervision. When the ambush was initiated and the road blocked, elements of two march units, a total of 58 vehicles, jammed into the kill zone. Convoy personnel were inadequately trained in counterambush procedures. Although there were numerous examples of individual bravery, the overall reaction was one of confusion. There were neither sufficient security forces traveling with the convoy, nor reaction forces outposted near enough to provide a responsive reaction to the ambush.

Analysis

This enemy success triggered a complete reevaluation of convoy movement and security procedures by the 25th Infantry Division. These areas were studied:

a. Convoy organization. The convoy must be manageable and configured so that each march unit can operate independently. March units must be limited in size to facilitate control. Ammunition and fuel vehicles should move at the rear to prevent an entire convoy from being blocked by a burning vehicle. Convoys should
include wreckers and spare tractors. Vehicle interval must be determined by terrain, road conditions, and unit experience. March units must maintain sufficient interval to preclude more than one unit being caught in the killing zone of a single enemy ambush (figure 1).

b. Convoy control. Military Police (MP) elements must provide convoy control. Each march unit must have a commander and an assistant, one leading and the other trailing, in radio equipped vehicles. The convoy commander should be airborne over each convoy, controlling all march units and all security forces.

c. Reaction forces. Reaction forces must be immediately available and provided by the commander through whose area the convoy is moving. Armored vehicles must be outposted at critical points along the route. (This had proved more responsive than the earlier practice of having armor move with the convoy.) Gunship cover must be provided over areas which, because of terrain or previous contacts, are potential ambush sites.

d. Counterambush training. Convoy personnel must be given thorough instruction in counterambush procedures: Intensive efforts must be made to clear vehicles from the ambush killing zone. Vehicles not under fire must stop short of the ambush; vehicles in the ambush must attempt to continue through. Disabled vehicles must be driven or pushed off of the roadway. Vehicles beyond the ambush must continue to their destination.

e. Route clearance. Areas along supply routes where vegetation can conceal ambushing forces must be cleared. Road clearing forces must move ahead of each convoy, clearing the entire route of mines and searching for signs of enemy presence. Security vehicles must immediately precede and follow each column.

APPLICATION

Several months after the August 1968 ambush, another convoy, operating under the revised procedures, began to assemble. At the same time, 17 km to the north, the enemy was preparing an ambush in a rubber plantation along the route. This was to be the first test of the new procedures. Before the convoy moved out, the most likely ambush sites were swept by area commanders. Combat elements were positioned at several likely ambush sites; the route was cleared of mines and booby traps.

The convoy traversed most of the route without incident. The final leg, which ran through the rubber plantation, lay ahead. The road was flanked by relatively flat terrain that had been recently cleared of vegetation. The first march unit and half
PRESENT CONVOY CONFIGURATION

Figure 1

- H.P Scout jeep
- H.F Scout jeep
- H.F jeep
- Security vehicle
- Cargo vehicles

March Unit

Following March Units (Same Configuration)

Trail Party
- H.F jeep
- Recovery vehicles
- H.F jeep
- Security vehicle

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of the second had entered the plantation when mortars began falling on and beside road. Recoilless rifles, rocket propelled grenade launchers, and automatic weapons were fired at the convoy from both sides of the road. The training and orientation of convoy personnel quickly became evident as they began to react. Vehicles short of the ambush halted and organized local security. Drivers moved damaged vehicles off of the roadway, allowing other vehicles in the killing zone to continue with the forward elements to their destination.

Meanwhile, the enemy force was engaged by the convoy's security elements, and previously positioned reaction forces were quickly committed against the enemy's rear. Preplanned artillery fires, gunships and tactical air strikes were placed on the enemy force. When the engagement was over, the enemy had suffered 73 killed and large quantities of weapons and equipment captured. Friendly losses were extremely light. In short, the enemy's ambush force had been soundly defeated.

In the following months, the enemy engaged several more convoys. In every instance, he saw the same fleeting target followed by an overwhelming US reaction, gaining him little in return for extremely heavy losses.

LESSONS LEARNED

US supply convoys are lucrative targets for enemy ambushes; however, they can be defeated by an alert, prepared US force. The following lessons can be learned from these convoy operations:

a. Alert convoy personnel reduce the enemy's chance of success. To be effective during the critical first minutes, they must have been thoroughly briefed on counterambush procedures.

b. Convoys must be organized so as to reduce their vulnerability to ambushes. March unit size, vehicle separation, location of security and control vehicles, and placement by types-of-cargoes within the convoy are major considerations.

c. Each march unit must be equipped and organized to function independently when under attack.

d. Reaction forces must be positioned to react immediately to an enemy ambush. This includes elements outposted at critical points along the route.

e. Supply route must be cleared of mines and cover and concealment for ambush forces.
CONCLUSIONS

The actions taken by the 25th Infantry Division have successfully countered enemy ambushes in its area of operations. Invariably, the enemy suffers heavily when attempting to ambush a 25th Infantry Division convoy. These actions clearly illustrate how enemy potential strengths can be made weaknesses and ambushes can be decisively defeated.

FOR THE COMMANDER:

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