


# Decisive-Action Training 'Old School Without



*A visually modified opposing force (OPFOR) vehicle replicating a Soviet-era BMP climbs a hill at the National Training Center (NTC), Fort Irwin, Calif., as the OPFOR makes a conventional armored attack during a decisive-action training rotation. Decisive-action training reintroduces conventional warfare scenarios within the context of wide-area security operations that also include a range of unconventional threats.*

# Rotations: Going Back in Time'

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A photograph of a desert landscape with mountains in the background and a military vehicle in the foreground. The vehicle is a dark-colored armored vehicle, possibly a tank or a heavy transport, with a turret visible on the left side. The terrain is rocky and sparsely vegetated with small shrubs. The sky is clear and blue.

**A**s first splinters of dawn hit the desert at the National Training Center (NTC), Fort Irwin, Calif., on a day in early December, the Blackhorse Regiment (11th Armored Cavalry Regiment) was back in the saddle again, spewing dust trails from their armored vehicles across NTC's vast Mojave training area as the opposing force (OPFOR) raced toward the Blue Force training rotation unit to visit virtual destruction on them. It was a taste of the old days of conventional armored force-on-force battles at NTC when hundreds of yellow blinking lights—indicating individual vehicle “kills”—filled NTC's valleys and draws.

The old days of massive armored training clashes occurred more than a decade ago, before 9/11 and the wars



in Iraq and Afghanistan, when the NTC and the Army's other training centers changed focus to prepare units for counterinsurgency (COIN) warfare.

**A**rmor clashes are coming back in an expanded hybrid way, however, as the Army shifts from the exclusive use of its training centers to train deploying units to increasingly prepare brigade combat teams (BCTs) for future engagements, setting the training foundation for Army 2020.

The Army's BCT collective training is entering a crossroad, gradually making the turn from COIN deployment training as requirements decrease for Afghanistan toward the Mission Command-oriented complexities of future fights, nation assistance and wide-area security.

It is called decisive-action training, and there is more to it than a reintroduction of conventional force-on-force training engagements. That type of training combines with the overall requirements of conducting wide-area security opera-



*Clockwise from top left, CPT John Principe, an observer-trainer-mentor (OTM) from NTC's Tarantula Team, makes a radio call as dawn breaks during a training scenario. Bradley fighting vehicles from the 1st Brigade Combat Team (BCT), 4th Infantry Division (Mechanized), use a pass over a hill range to maneuver against the OPFOR during a decisive-action training rotation at NTC in early December. A 1st BCT platoon leader takes aim during a dismounted operation. (He wears an older desert combat uniform pattern chemical suit for training purposes.) Two 1st BCT soldiers make a dash toward the objective during a dismounted attack.*





*Above, a Bradley fighting vehicle waits to counter an OPFOR attack as the sun breaks at NTC.*

*Right, a soldier role-playing as a host-nation troop (wearing the battle dress uniform pattern to identify him) jumps through a window at a mock town to fight in conjunction with soldiers from the 1st BCT, 4th Infantry Division (1st BCT/4th ID) as they undergo decisive-action training at NTC.*

tions that include COIN elements and a few extra wrinkles. Decisive-action training rotations will prepare BCTs for what the Army sees as the probable thrust of future deployments and engagements they will face.

Decisive action includes pretty much everything from armor fights to humanitarian operations (simultaneously) with insurgent forces and criminal gangs thrown into the mix along with the need to gain the trust and fight alongside friendly coalition forces, and it includes an increased emphasis on the tenets of Mission Command.

**T**he commander, Operations Group, known as the COG, orchestrates the combined training effects that NTC can throw at the training unit, serving as the director, in a film-maker sense, of the training unit's individualized training scenario, which is the structural script of the training rotation made up of hundreds of individual, detailed scenarios developed for the event. The COG paces it all, emphasizing some over others as the training goes along to steer the unit toward a training goal and increasing or lowering





*Soldiers from the 1st Battalion, 22nd Infantry (1-22 Infantry) move through an urban combat training village during a training assault.*

training effects to do the steering while ensuring the overall safety of the event.

COL Paul Calvert, who currently serves as NTC's COG, explained what went into creating decisive-action training rotations:

The first decisive-action rotation at NTC was done in March 2012. There were months of scenario design that were put into developing the decisive-action threat environment. That caused us to build an environment that would be conducive to U.S. forces coming into a country that we had not been into previously and with which we had not done much engagement in the past but was a friend of the United States, introducing forces into the theater when the country is being threatened.

There were a lot of things from a planning standpoint that went into building an environment [within which] we could ... design a scenario that is credible to the unit coming here to execute the training rotation.

Significant to the scenario is the opponent. What was developed was near-peer threat ... and in conjunction with that near-peer conventional threat were an insurgency force as well as a guerrilla/paramilitary threat and a criminal network, all of which the rotational unit has the opportunity to influence in some form or fashion—drive wedges between the insurgency/paramilitary threat, for example, to keep them from combining efforts and collaborating against U.S. forces. There are multiple threads that present the opportunity for the U.S. forces to negate the collaborative effort between the insurgency as well as the guerrilla forces.

The environment is complex; the threat is complex. The rotational unit has to deal



*A 1-22 Infantry soldier aims into a doorway as he moves during decisive-action training.*



*Above, an OTM HUMVEE raises dust as it travels through the NTC training area. Right, LTC Paul Garcia—a senior OTM (Tarantula 07)—listens to a key leader meeting during training.*

with many different things. It is not only conducting combined-arms maneuver but also executing wide-area security, and a number of threats exist as part of that wide-area security.

It's a little bit of the flavor of a conventional fight as well as that of a counterinsurgency fight.

We spent the last 10–12 years in a counterinsurgency fight; we have a lot of skills in those types of operations, and we don't want those to atrophy over time. Thus the need was to build a complex environment in which we have multiple threats that a unit is going to have to deal with so we can get back into training core competencies and our baseline skills to fight combined-arms maneuver while still maintaining the skills that have been honed over the last 10–12 years in counterinsurgency as we execute wide-area security operations.

The biggest difference between the decisive-action rotations now and the rotations that we were running pre-2003 is the complexity of the threat. Before, we had a near-peer threat that we were dealing with in high-intensity conflict; now we have a complex threat that is a near-peer enemy as well as guerrilla insurgency and criminal networks.





*Left, technicians monitor video and other sensor feeds from a control center overlooking the National Urban Warfare Center. The National Urban Warfare Center is a city of more than 300 training buildings built in the desert training area of NTC. The city is 90 percent instrumented, and up to 350 day/night cameras can record activity to provide visual feedback for after-action reviews. Below, a 1st Battalion, 66th Armor (1-66 Armor), soldier drags a mock casualty to cover during training. (The soldiers wear an old-pattern chemical suit mix for training purposes.)*



**N**TC employs vast training assets. Technical assets include complex instrumentation to assess training data and specialized effects that make the training as real as possible: pyrotechnics, makeup and prosthetics to create realistic casualties, and a scalable cast of role-players, many of whom are native speakers of the language used at the training unit's deployment location. There also is a complex system to capture video of the training to provide feedback to the unit undergoing training. Most video stations are remotely controlled today.

The foundation for training at NTC is embodied by the hundreds of observer-trainer-mentors (OTMs as they are called today), the NCOs and officers from the Operations Group who accompany troops and commanders at every level of the unit undergoing training.

The 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment's NTC training mission is to provide a credible OPFOR while NTC's 916th Support Brigade conducts the reception, staging, onward movement and integration mission for the training rotation unit and then supports its redeployment back to its home station.



*Right, soldiers from 1-66 Armor assault through barriers at NTC during decisive-action training. Bottom right, flame jumps from a training detonation to replicate a rocket-propelled grenade explosion.*



Since 9/11, entire towns and villages have been built in the once-empty desert training area to accommodate training for operating in population centers. Some towns have vast tunnel systems running under them to add to the complexity, and technicians can even remotely infuse smells into the tunnels and buildings, ranging from freshly baked bread to sewage, to add to the realism.

Meanwhile, much of the garrison portion of Fort Irwin has been improved since 9/11 to better support soldiers and family members stationed there and the tens of thousands of active and reserve component soldiers who come there annually to train. Range complexes continue to be improved for the live-fire portion of a unit's training rotation.

Two years ago, NTC incorporated a southern expansion area after several years of work to meet state and federal requirements, including environmental protection requirements, and to address citizen concerns. The result is a training area of roughly 1,200 square miles today, making it about the size of the state of Rhode Island, according to officials.

"Importantly, we control the airspace over NTC through agreements with the Federal Aviation Administration and other services," said BG Terry Ferrell, the commanding general of NTC and Fort Irwin. "We also are nested regionally with the bases of other services—Edwards Air Force Base,





*Left, an OPFOR Javelin gunner takes aim at Blue Force vehicles during the opening stages of decisive-action training at NTC. Bottom left, an OTM holds his so-called “god gun” at the ready. The pistol-shaped instrument can be used to inflict a hit on vehicle or individual soldier sensors if the OTM decides it is warranted, and it can also be used to resurrect a soldier or vehicle from a previous hit, hence the name.*



Calif., and Marine Corps Base Twenty-Nine Palms, Calif. The Navy can fly missions from San Diego Naval Air Station down the coast. We are positioned to work joint training and special operations training. We have conducted multinational training, but the area in which we want to expand is interagency training, incorporating more training with U.S. federal agencies to prepare the military and the other agencies to work together better for future operations.”

**B**G Ferrell said that NTC has vastly increased its capacity for cyber operations training in recent years and that levels I and II cyber attacks can now be launched against units training at NTC to increase their countermeasure capabilities. Today, the training area box also has a closed-cell-phone system that allows units to train in areas that might involve intelligence gathering or system disruption.

“We can even conduct GPS [global positioning system] jamming during limited periods in limited locations,” he added.

During decisive-action training rotations, NTC forces the training unit to run off its tactical communications backbone and not train as though they can plug into a mature theater communications system.

*Right, an 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR) soldier checks for movement. The 11th ACR—the Blackhorse Regiment—acts as the OPFOR at NTC. Bottom right, Bradley fighting vehicles from the 1st BCT/4th ID maneuver toward an objective.*



Overall, the general said that decisive-action training goes toward “re-bluing” Army units to increase or bring back skills that have deteriorated to meet the immediate needs of the operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Improving combined-arms capabilities is vital to re-bluing, according to the Army’s top leaders.

Decisive-action training goes further, however, said BG Ferrell, incorporating features applicable under the U.S. Army Training Command’s Training Circular 7-100, “Hybrid Threat Capabilities.”

He also said that an ever-growing threat database will be used to insert specifics and add realism to training scenarios at NTC in the future as the Army designates regionally aligned units.

“Regional alignment is where we are moving,” BG Ferrell explained.

Generally speaking, however, decisive-action training rotations “de-FOB” (forward operating base) the Army. For many years, Army BCTs have moved into fixed facilities in Iraq and Afghanistan with a range of operational and personal comfort assets waiting for them. Even units training at NTC operated from FOBs as they would in-theater.

For decisive-action training rotations, the FOBs are gone.

“Soldiers will be living in the dirt—their Bradley or command post will be their life,” the general explained. “Units will train with what they have, replicating initial entry or forcible entry into an austere environment, and they will see for themselves what they can or cannot do.”





**A**s decisive-action training affects the greater Army's training goals, COL Calvert said, "We're gauging overall success on [whether] we're learning every day. Are we getting better every day? Are we gaining understanding of how to execute Mission Command at brigade and battalion levels? Are we training to our core competencies for combined-arms maneuver, and are we continuing sustainment training of those skills that were learned over the last 10–12 years in COIN operations?"

"We are trying to stress systems and processes, and we're trying to reestablish the core competencies of our forces that atrophied over a number of years: shoot, move, communicate and improve the ability to integrate enablers such as fires and intelligence collection assets. This is where the Army is going in the future, no doubt about it."

BG Ferrell explained, "Decisive-action training is 'old school' without going back in time. It's preparing for the next fight." ★



*Top left, soldiers from the 1-66 Armor check for OPFOR activity. Left, the 1-22 Infantry commander, LTC Steve Adams (right) uses an interpreter to converse with an NTC contractor role-playing the part of a provincial governor during the 1st BCT/4th ID decisive-action training rotation.*