

Fig 3-8. The horseshoe defense<sup>25</sup>.

Another example comes from some recent training in the Army's 1st Ranger Battalion. Squads were pitted against other squads in a free play environment. Most of the squads, on their own initiative, adopted a simple formation made up of a probing element out front with three or four men and a supporting element made up of the rest of the squad. Often, when the probing element encountered the enemy, it would withdraw while the supporting element set up a hasty ambush. The probing element would draw the enemy into the ambush. They were using the ambush in the attack.

On a larger scale, the Chinese made effective use of the ambush in the attack during the Korean War. At night, they would infiltrate an American battalion, get into its rear, and set up blocking positions. The next morning, they would attack the American unit frontally and force it back. As the Americans withdrew, they would be ambushed from blocking positions they didn't know were there.

Again, the guiding ideas are the same. You want to surprise the enemy. You want to set him up, to play "Gotcha!" with him. You want to remain invisible, as when you infiltrate. You want shock the enemy. And you want to focus on the enemy, on destroying and defeating him, not just on capturing terrain. The ambush mentality runs through the attack as much as through the defense.

#### *Conclusion*

At this point, you should recognize that the ambush mentality goes much beyond ambush as a patrolling technique, beyond thinking about deliberate and hasty ambushes. Ambush is a way of thinking. It is a central part of being a **light** infantryman. It is how you get inside your opponent's mind. It is how you play games with him, terrify him, make him afraid to move and act--make him afraid of **you**. Most of you know how to do it. You have done it in play, in sports, and often when acting as aggressors in an exercise. As Marine leaders in maneuver warfare, you will make sure it runs through everything you do.

### **IX. Military Significance of Terrain**

Your success in tactics depends greatly on how well you use terrain. You will usually evaluate terrain from two perspectives. First, you must decide which terrain is key to either you or the enemy. Great tacticians develop an intuitive ability to recognize valuable terrain and exploit it.

Second, you must use terrain to your advantage. For two forces equal in combat power, the force that best uses the terrain will usually win.

#### *Key Terrain*

Key terrain is any locality or area that gives you a marked advantage over the enemy when you control it. You need not occupy key terrain, only **control** it or deny its use to the enemy. Go back to figure 3-7 in example 3-3. The Salado River Bridge in that example is key terrain. It is important to the enemy because he is retreating, and it is the only way for him to get across the river. By capturing it, you create a tremendous problem for him, one that appears to have no easy solution. If you succeed in trapping him south of the river, you will probably defeat him. By denying the use of the bridge to the enemy, you prevent him from *doing something he wants to do*.

Sometimes, controlling key terrain allows you to accomplish *what you want to do*.<sup>26</sup> Let's look at an example of this:

#### **Example 3-4**

Look at figure 3-9. Assume that you are the 1st Platoon Commander of A Company, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines. Your company is attacking north to cut off an enemy breakthrough in the regiment's zone of action.

The company commander has designated the 2d platoon as the main effort and tasked it with attacking north to cut off the enemy penetration. Your mission is to protect the company's right flank to expedite the 2d platoon's attack.

With regard to your mission, identify any key terrain.

From the diagram, you should have selected the pass between Hill 250 and Hill 340 as key terrain. Control of this pass is critical to accomplishing your mission. You are faced with an enemy force of unknown size that is east of the pass along Route 5. If the enemy controls the pass, he threatens your company's attack north. You do not know the size or intentions of the enemy, but you should send a patrol to the pass to determine both as soon as possible. Time is extremely important; if the enemy controls the pass before you do, then you will have a tough time taking control of it from him.

Remember, you do not have to occupy the pass to control it. You may want to go beyond the pass and attack the enemy to disrupt his plans. You may be able to control the pass from a position west of it. Either way, you must gain and maintain control of the pass to protect the right flank of the main effort.

Key terrain is always situational. It must relate to what the enemy is doing or what you are trying to do. Go back to figure 3-7 in example 3-3. If there were another bridge or ford that allowed the enemy to escape, then, by itself, the Salado River Bridge would not be key terrain. Perhaps both bridges together would be key terrain but not either by itself. In modern, high tempo warfare, key terrain features are likely to change rapidly. It will not always be obvious which terrain features are key. Each of the examples presented so far has been simplified to illustrate points. In combat, you must deal with an independent, thinking enemy who will mask his intentions while trying to discover yours. If he is clever, he will try to deceive you into thinking certain terrain features are key and draw you into a trap. To avoid getting trapped, you must not only know your enemy, but also evaluate how he might use the terrain against you.

In combat, selecting key terrain is one of your most important tasks. You must always judge the terrain with regard to the situation and the enemy.

#### *Using Terrain to Your Advantage*

When deciding how best to use terrain, you usually look at it from three aspects: mobility, security, and its effect on the fire from your weapons. Let's first look at each aspect individually and then consider how the three are interrelated.

**Mobility** is critically important to a military force in battle. Your mobility is a combination of two factors: the ability to move quickly and the ability to move over all types of terrain on the battlefield. Like tempo, mobility is only important in relative terms. You need only be more mobile than the enemy.

A unit's mobility is a direct function of the terrain. This is why some forces are very mobile in one type of terrain but less mobile in others. For example, in most deserts, a mechanized force is considered more mobile than a light infantry force. The mechanized force uses its vehicles to move faster than the foot mobile infantry over open terrain. However, in mountainous and wooded terrain, the light infantry force usually has greater mobility because it is less restricted by the terrain. The mechanized force is restricted to movement on roads and through mountain passes. Light infantry can slow the mechanized force down by creating obstacles at key choke points. It can also ambush tanks and armored personnel carriers at short range from the woods along the roads. Tanks are at a disadvantage in close range combat against infantry.

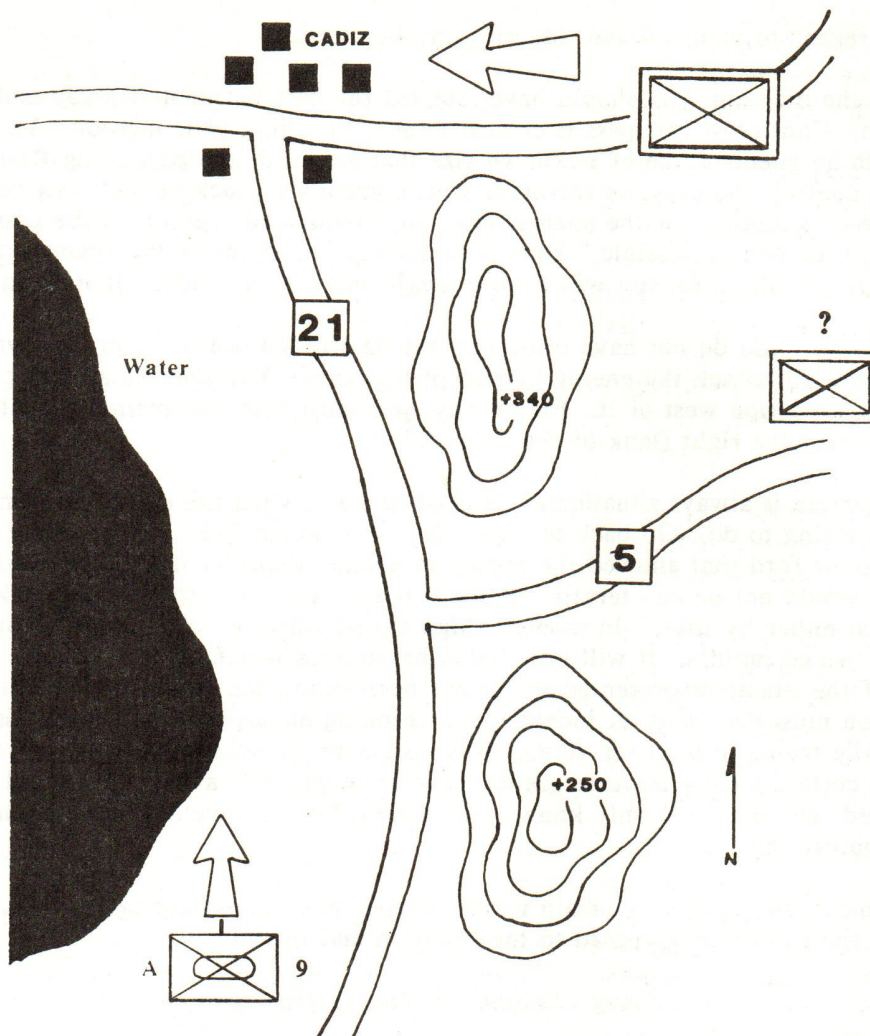


Fig 3-9.

Unless properly supported by their own infantry, tanks avoid driving down forested roads infested with enemy light infantry. Therefore, mobility, as a function of terrain, is always situational. You must know how terrain affects mobility, and task organize your forces accordingly.

The second aspect is **security**. In combat, you are always concerned about your unit's security. One of the worst things that can happen is to get surprised or ambushed by the enemy.

There are several ways to provide security for your unit. One way is to provide your own physical security from within your own forces. For example, you may task a subordinate unit with the mission of protecting one aspect of your main body, such as the right flank. The subordinate unit is called a security screen, and it takes any and all measures to protect your main body from an enemy threat to its right flank. The security screen could perform its mission in several ways. It might observe avenues of approach into your flank and warn you well in advance so that you can deal

with any threat. It might attack the threat preemptively or set up an ambush. Or, as in example 3-4, it might seize or control key terrain along your direction of advance. Either way, the reconnaissance screen protects you from being ambushed.

Sometimes, another unit will be tasked with providing security for you. For example, let's assume that you are the main effort in an attack, and that speed is imperative. To conserve your forces and speed the attack, your senior could provide other units to assist in your security. In that way, you can focus on your mission and look for opportunities to do something decisive. If you are the main effort, you should not hesitate to take risks, because other units should support what you are trying to do. If you are not the main effort, then you must support it. You may be tasked with screening its flank or rear. Remember, the main effort is decisive. It will often assume risks. These risks are minimized by other units acting to support it.

Remember, *speed is also security*. When you operate at a high tempo, presenting the enemy with multiple threats, you gain security by virtue of your aggressive actions. In many situations, speed is your best means of providing security.

You can also use terrain to provide security. That can allow you to conserve your forces for use elsewhere. For example, assume that you are attacking north with the river on your right flank and that the river has no fords or bridges along the direction of movement (see figure 3-10). The river protects your right flank because the enemy cannot attack you across it. Whether you are moving or stationary, you want to look for terrain features that provide you with security, and use them.

Third, the **effectiveness of your weapons** is directly related to terrain. You must know the characteristics of your direct and indirect fire weapons and which of them are best suited for various types of terrain. For example, the Tube-launched Optically-tracked Wire-guided (TOW) anti-tank missile is most effective in open, relatively flat terrain. It is a line of sight weapon: The missile must have a clear path to the target, and the gunner must be able to see the target continuously to hit it. In close terrain, the TOW loses its effectiveness. Its wires become easily fouled on obstacles, and its minimum range (65 meters) severely restricts its use in close combat. Other anti-tank weapons, like the AT-4 or RPG, are more effective in close terrain since they are not wire-guided and do not have a minimum range.

In your tactical decision-making, you must weigh the tradeoffs between mobility, security, and weapons effectiveness. One example is the tradeoff between firepower and security. For example, let's suppose that you are tasked with defending an area and you must decide which terrain is best suited for establishing defensive positions (see figure 3-11). Assume that, based on the situation, you must choose between a defense of the forward slope or reverse slope of Hill 225. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each?

The advantages of a forward slope defense are well known to experienced Marines. The forward slope usually provides good observation and fields of fire to the front. It also forces an attacking enemy to assault uphill if he chooses to assault frontally. The main disadvantage is that forward slope positions are visible at great distances if they are prepared in the open. An attacking enemy discovers your disposition early,

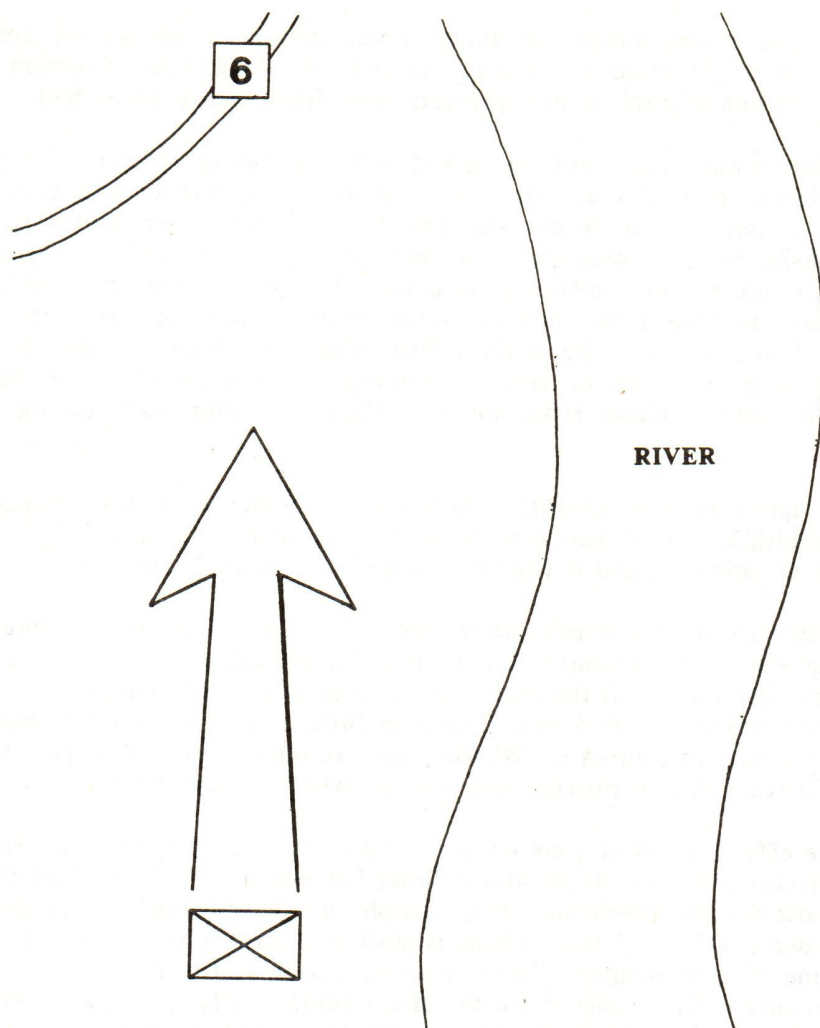


Fig 3-10.

and he then plasters you with fire. Modern indirect fire weapons devastate prepared positions.

An alternative method is the reverse slope defense. In this type of defense, you establish positions on the reverse slope of Hill 225. You maintain surprise because an attacking enemy won't discover your disposition until he crosses over the crest of the hill. In effect, you ambush him after he crosses the crest and starts down the reverse slope. You might also want to place forward observers on the crest of the hill to adjust indirect fire on the advancing enemy. This delays him and causes attrition of his forces.

Which type of defense is best? The answer is situational, but in modern, fluid warfare, a number of factors favor a reverse slope style of defense. Modern weapons have become extremely lethal in terms of range and effect. The current trend gives

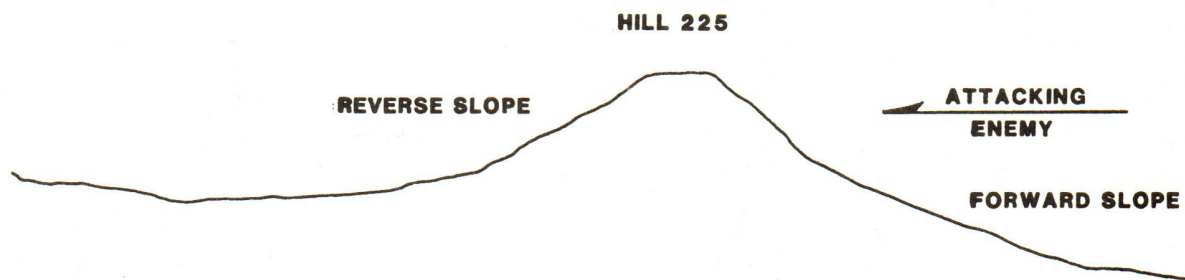


Fig 3-11.

credence to the phrase, "If it can be seen, it can be hit, and if it can be hit, it will be killed." Modern artillery is devastating when targeted against static positions in the open. Therefore, the advantage of surprise makes the reverse slope style appealing, particularly if you are at a disadvantage in firepower. Whenever possible, you want to ambush the enemy and force him to react to you rather than you having to react to him.

You also want to avoid defending a fixed piece of terrain. If you must defend a fixed point, such as a specific hill or static logistics facility, and the enemy knows this, then you are at a disadvantage. The enemy will most likely retain the initiative because he can choose where and when to attack, and you must react to him. Again, he will plaster you with fire, especially artillery. While in a defensive position, you should strive to remain fluid and flexible; defend an area, rather than a fixed point. When you defend an area, you choose when and where to fight, and when to attack or defend.

Keep the other tactical fundamentals in mind when you evaluate terrain. You want to keep your tempo of operations high, so you should always look for opportunities to use terrain that makes you fast and mobile. Think of enemy surfaces and gaps when choosing routes of advance. You want to attack through gaps into the enemy's rear

areas, and deny him avenues into your own rear areas. Finally, remember what you are trying to do--your mission and commander's intent--when choosing key terrain or terrain that gives you an advantage. In combat, your ability to judge the value of terrain is fundamental to your success as a leader of Marines.