

Why Build a Frontal Parapet Fighting Hole?

The frontal parapet fighting hole significantly strengthens a unit's defensive position. In 1976, the U.S. Army compared three types of fighting holes – open, split-parapet, and frontal parapet. Seventy-two platoon attacks were conducted against three types of squad positions. The results are shown in the table.¹

U.S. Army 1976 Fighting Hole Evaluation				
Analysis		Type of Fighting Hole		
		Open	Split Parapet	Frontal Parapet
1. Casualty Exchange Ratio	Atk: Def	2.9 : 1	5.1 : 1	6.2 : 1
2. Time Defenders were suppressed		48.9 %	38.4 %	34.6 %
3. Defender's Angle of Engagement	Day	20.1	21.1	32.1
	Night	21.8	26.5	37.7
4. Attacker accuracy. Hits per 100 rounds.		3.1	1.4	1.0

Units fighting from frontal parapet fighting holes:

Suffer Less Friendly Casualties

Defenders in open holes are wounded *three times* more often than defenders behind frontal cover. Conversely, attackers need to fire *three times* more ammunition against parapet holes than against open holes to inflict a wound. And these casualty ratios apply only *after* the enemy has located the position.

Invisible fighting holes, not seen by the enemy, protect defenders from *all* fires and *all* casualties. On the modern battlefield, what can be seen can be hit, and what can be hit can be destroyed. Enemy tank cannon and missiles are precision instruments for destroying fighting positions, but not if the position cannot be seen.

Inflict More Enemy Casualties

Because a frontal parapet protects defenders while they engage the attacker, defenders inflict *six times* more casualties than they receive. One position prepared by the 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry at Loc Ninh in Vietnam caused a casualty ratio of 198 to 1.²

Surprise the Enemy

Defenders in invisible fighting positions surprise the enemy with effective fire from unknown locations, much like an ambush. Enemy support fires, from preparatory artillery and mortars, to machinegun, RPG, and missile fires are difficult to coordinate against unseen positions.

Defeat Enemy Suppression

When an open hole is suppressed by the enemy, the defender is forced to duck almost 50% of the time. While defenders cannot see and cannot use their weapons, enemy units maneuver to assault.

Frontal cover defeats suppression. Frontal cover defeats the enemy's mutual support, overwatch, fire and movement, and assault fires. Defenders in frontal parapet fighting holes are not suppressed by direct frontal fire and their return fire reduces the effectiveness of the attacker's fires. Frontal parapet positions enable defenders to keep firing on an advancing enemy even when subjected to both

indirect and direct fire simultaneously. Defender's fires are equally accurate from all types of holes, approximately 12 hits per 100 rounds, with no difference in kill ranges. Defenders in open holes, however, become significantly *less* effective once they are suppressed and begin taking casualties.

Defenders shoot 90% of their attackers on an oblique angle anyway, even from open holes, so frontal observation generates tremendous vulnerability in exchange for a small degree of freedom to observe and fire that is rarely used.

Disadvantages

Notes

Strong defensive positions are psychologically important. Well-entrenched units are eager to aggressively engage the enemy.

The frontal parapet fighting hole, known in the US Army as the DePuy (da-pew) fighting hole, was named after General William E. DePuy:

“In World War II...we saw the German soldier...on...rare occasions, nor were we able to suppress him...when I looked...I was impressed by the way he picked positions where his body and his head were protected from frontal fire yet he was able to defend...no matter what we threw at him.”³

Some defenders are concerned about the parapet fighting hole being blind to the front.

Frontal parapet fighting positions:

- Take time and work to construct.
- Take tools and materials to construct.
- Are more challenging to select, lay out, and coordinate.
- Are blind to the front.
- Limit fields of fire, especially for machineguns.
- Are dependent on adjacent positions for mutual support.⁴

Overhead Cover

Overhead cover provides *ten times* more protection than open holes. In 1976, the German Infantry School at Hammelburg conducted a fighting position test. They fired artillery and mortars at three types of infantry positions, hasty positions in the open, trenches without overhead cover, and trenches with overhead cover. Infantry in the open suffered 100% casualties, those in trenches 30%, and those under covered positions, 10%. A separate 1977 U.S. Army test at Fort Leavenworth found that seven anti-tank fighting positions were destroyed for every enemy armored vehicle destroyed, but *not* by return fire – ninety-five percent of these fighting position losses were from indirect fire.⁵

Overhead cover permits a defender to use indirect fire on his own position, a tactic used by the Japanese during World War II.

During the Falklands War in 1982, a Scots Guards battalion preceded one attack on an Argentine Marine position with a generous artillery barrage. The defensive position was, “exceptionally well-prepared. Many trenches had deep bunkers...often burrowed under the natural overhang of rock.” Not one man in these well-prepared positions was wounded by British artillery.⁶

Sources

- ¹ Combat Developments Experimentation Command. *Evaluation of the Frontal Parapet Foxhole, Final Report CDEC Experiment FCO33, October 1976*. Cited in Gorman, Paul F. *The Secret of Future Victories*. Fort Leavenworth Kansas: Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, February 1992, pp III-25.27.

See also: "Infantry Fighting Positions." TRADOC Message 16 December 1975. *Selected Papers of General William E. DePuy*. Compiled by Richard M. Swain. Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1994. pp 171-175. See: "A New Fighting Hole." Thomas Greenwood. *Marine Corps Gazette*, April 1987, pp 57-59.
- ^{2,3} *Changing an Army: An Oral History of General William E. DePuy, USA Retired*. Romie L. Brownlee and William J. Mullen III. Washington, DC: United States Army Center of Military History, 1985.
- ⁴ "Bunker Building." Arthur C. Lane and James D. Stephens, *Infantry*, Sept-Oct 1969, pp 46-50. This article discusses the advantages and disadvantages of the frontal parapet positions that General DePuy, the 1st Division CG, mandated in Vietnam.
- ⁵ "Requiem for the Infantry" Robert G. Chaudrue. *Infantry*, Vol 68, No 3. May-June 1978, pp 28-31. Also cited in John A. English, *A Perspective on Infantry*, Praeger Publishers, New York, 1981.
- ⁶ Captain J.B.A. Bailey, MBE, Royal Artillery, "Prepared Hardened Field Defences," *British Army Review*, August 1982, pp 26-30.