

Allies upset by US 'hell on wheels'

from IAN MATHER
in Hildesheim

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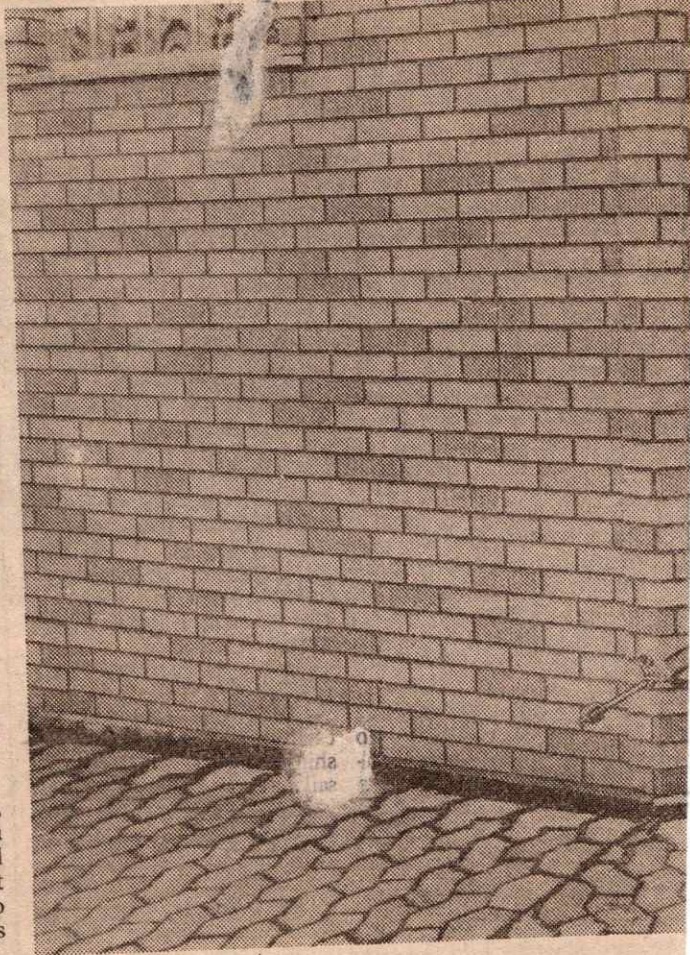
This new official doctrine, adopted in 1982, embodies a number of highly controversial features, one of which is that commanders are expected to make earlier contingency plans to use nuclear weapons.

Unlike the previous doctrine, which implied that the American army would fight in a relatively static manner, the new concept emphasises what the manual explaining it describes as 'the spirit of the offense.'

It has two controversial aspects. First, an emphasis on 'deep strikes' by aircraft and so-called 'emerging technology' weapons against enemy troop concentrations and airfields up to 100 miles behind the front line to prevent following forces from reaching the battle area. Second, 'integrating' nuclear weapons with conventional ones in such a way as to require earlier contingency plans for their use.

These ideas, particularly when accompanied by Air Land Battle's emphasis on speed, manoeuvrability and counter-offenses have led critics to argue that the doctrine is inherently aggressive.

Air Land Battle was first tried in Europe in 1981.



Urban warfare : An American infantryman takes

One American division launched 22 attacks of battalion size (800 troops) or bigger in eight days, four times as many as in the previous year.

'With Air Land Battle the United States has deviated from most military thinking in NATO,' a Pentagon source told *The Observer*. 'The alliance doctrine is that you identify enemy strength and counter it. But because the Warsaw Pact has more on its side it always wins, and we have to go nuclear.'

'But in the 1982 exercise we attacked the enemy's flanks using anti-tank helicopters. We didn't trade our expensive new tanks one for one with theirs. It was Patton compared with the Maginot Line.'

In last week's NATO exercises, elements of the Americans' dynamic new thinking were much in evidence, although American commanders insisted they were not

were excluded from the war games.

The Americans were using their latest tank, the Abrams, of which more than 7,000 are on order, and a new fast armoured personnel carrier, the Bradley, together for the first time in a NATO exercise.

Fire at speed

The Abrams has a top speed of 70 mph according to Colonel Ben Covington, commander of the so-called 'Hell on Wheels' brigade which had flown to the defence of Europe from Texas — 'although at that speed it wouldn't stay on the road,' he said. 'It is still so fast that it can throw everybody's timing of balance. It can also fire at speed.'

The Americans, who were playing the part of the 'Orange' forces, launched a counter-attack which bore all the hallmarks of 'Air Land Battle' and claimed to have

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Urban warfare : An American infantryman takes cover while 'defending' one of the small villages near Hildesheim.

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The Americans, who were playing the part of the

wiped out a substantial proportion of the opposing 'Blue' force, which was British. The Americans also carried on fighting at night, although they were supposed to stop and pretend that their supply lines had been hit.

Such was the Americans' will to win that they were not above a little cheating. One American company commander admitted that he had been surrounded by a British force in a village the previous night but had simply driven his tanks out along the road because no unimpres were around to pronounce his troops dead or taken prisoner.

The Americans stress that Air Land Battle is their own world-wide doctrine and is not NATO policy. However, they are seeking ways of applying it in

A West German

par Weinberger should present a comprehensive report on 'the most effective means by which NATO military forces can be operationally integrated to implement the Air Land Battle doctrine.'

The discussions with the European members of NATO do not appear to be making good progress.

West Germany has been irritated by US demands, according to a European diplomatic source. In discussions with the Americans, the West Germans have made it plain that they consider 'deep strike' tactics dangerous. Threatening to strike far into East Germany and Czechoslovakia could lead the Russians to launch their own pre-emptive action, they say.

A West German

Photograph by JOHN HODDER

as much as possible. In Britain, too, there is considerable sensitivity. Defence Secretary Michael Heseltine said in reply to a Commons question last May: 'I can confirm that the Air Land Battle document is not agreed NATO strategy. There are discussions in NATO about a range of options but that document is not agreed in NATO.'

However, his junior Minister, John Stanley, perhaps unintentionally, confirmed that Air Land Battle doctrine was being used by the Americans when he said in the Commons on 15 June: 'All national formations at corps level and below which come under NATO command in Europe would fight according to national doctrine.'

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