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Wednesday's Words of Quality

Empowerment at the level of the Hedgerow, literally

One of the advantages of a Lean culture is that problems are highlighted in real time by the person doing the job at the time the problem occurs. More importantly, the Lean system of work empowers the workforce to propose local innovations to solve problems whose resolutions are now owned by those who do the actual work. I found the story related below to be pertinent to our own culture as leaders, managers and teams of innovators at the "front lines" of healthcare as we tackle the unanticipated. It's the story of a major unanticipated problem whose root cause analysis and solution was tied to a very personal outcome for tens of thousands of soldiers- immediate survival!

Nothing in the training camps had prepared American soldiers for Normandy's hedgerow country. For centuries, Norman farmers had used hedges - bocage, in French - to separate their fields and meadows, most of which weren't much bigger than a football field. Over the centuries, the roots took hold deep in the soil, while the branches climbed high in the air. Traffic in the narrow country lanes gradually wore down the dirt roads, making them sunken lanes flanked with berms topped by bocage.

To today's tourist, the hedgerows make for marvelous scenery. To the, American infantryman of 1944, they made for misery. The Germans hid machine guns behind, the bocage and waited for the Americans to tiptoe into the fields through narrow gaps. The Germans made each meadow a botanical fortress, a miniature battlefield - a costly and bloody affair.

At first tanks proved useless. The narrow lanes hemmed in tanks, making them perfect targets for antitank rockets. The roots of the bocage made the berms too solid to smash through. Any tank that tried to go over the berms exposed its unarmored underbelly, an easy kill. Finally, an inventive American sergeant found the answer.

His name was Curtis Cullin, and he soldiered with the 102nd Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron. On July 14, 1944, Gen. Omar Bradley traveled to the 102nd to see Cullin's invention - rhinoceros horns. Cullin had salvaged two scrap-metal bars from the German obstacles on Omaha Beach. He welded them onto the front of his Sherman tank so they stuck out in front, like horns.

As Bradley watched, Cullin gunned his "rhino" Sherman into a hedgerow. The horns dug into the berm and kept the tank from climbing. Instead, the tank's engine powered all that weight straight ahead, punching through the berm. Bradley was so impressed that he ordered combat engineers to strip Omaha of all of its scrap metal and rush it forward to tank units. Soon, three out of every five Shermans became a rhino - and not long afterward, the Americans punched their way out of the bocage country.

From: Something about Everything Military, The Hell of Hedgerows

<http://www.ics-group.com/military/war1941normandy/hedgerows.html>