

Commandant's Note



New Horizons, New Goals

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As 2021 draws to a close, we find ourselves decisively committed to reducing threats to Soldiers, family members, and the civilian workforce as we strive to accomplish our missions. We continue to grapple with the COVID-19 virus. We will continue to meet the COVID challenge with vaccinations, masking, and social distancing guidelines. The readiness of the force that defends our homeland, her people, and her treasure, depends on the health of each and every one of us. COVID-19 is just one more enemy to engage and defeat.

For the last 20 years, we've spent a lot of effort on counterinsurgency (COIN) operations, but the times and players are changing. Our own preoccupation with COIN taught us a great deal, but Russia and China have not been wasting their time in their own corners of the world either. We are taking a hard look at large-scale combat operations (LSCO) to counter their adversarial ambitions in other global areas of interest. Both have been addressing real-world concerns in Asia along the Pacific Rim, and in the former Soviet satellite states bordering the Black Sea, Iran, Afghanistan, and other potential regional tripwires.

Just as our adversaries have long done, we have observed and have assessed the potential of LSCO; we also recognize the evolving nature of the threat. With that in mind, this issue of Infantry offers a comprehensive article describing a daytime air assault operation executed by the 1st Battalion, 27th Infantry Regiment during a Joint Readiness Training Center rotation at Fort Polk, LA, in October 2020. Continuous large-scale combat operations are inherently transitional because once initial contact is made all bets are off. Units sustain casualties, supplies run out or come late, and communications fail as a result of enemy action or on their own. When comms goes down, reporting unravels and the planned operation is victim to the exigencies of the current fight on the ground. In the Wolfhounds' operation, the initial air assault went well and early objectives were seized, but the unit took heavy casualties after dark and had to evacuate casualties under fire. The Wolfhounds had three main issues: relocation of the unit while in contact; execution of continuous medical evacuation (MEDEVAC); and resupply of the unit as a supplementary tasking. Battlefield access was a primary challenge to MEDEVAC in LSCO; the need to reach casualties to evacuate them revealed the criticality of planning for secure ground and reliable rotary wing assets. Steps to success for operations of this nature and complexity: assessing risk; maneuver force ratios; and intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB). We need to realistically evaluate a unit's ability to sustain offensive operations. IPB must be prioritized and sometimes triaged, and we must plan for transitions in contact. Near-peer adversaries will have the resources and technology to continue very successful disruption operations throughout the bulk of future conflicts.

Our significant potential adversaries of immediate concern have tacitly or even openly supported our battlefield enemies with technology, materiel assets, and in some cases maneuver units and trainers to support fielding of anti-aircraft and anti-armor systems and munitions. Given the increasingly sophisticated nature of communications and the growing speed and range of our adversaries' anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) networks, two fundamental vulnerabilities are readily apparent: Time and distance are increasingly critical because U.S. successes over the past decades have relied heavily on our ability to identify, plan, and execute those power projection missions such as the Osama Bin Laden takedown that has been covered in such detail on this, the 20th anniversary of the World Trade Center attacks. The viewing world has now learned how America transitioned from shock, to outrage, to meticulous planning, to a superbly executed assault on the perpetrator's hideout. Now we know how it was accomplished, but the rest of the world knows as well. This means that the next time — and there will always be a next time — the dogs of war are unleashed it will be more difficult because one thing we have lost over the last two and one-half centuries is how to keep a secret.

Technological advances have enhanced our adversaries' space, cyber, information, electronic warfare, weapons effects, and other capabilities. This effect alludes to the layered approach that will allow our adversary to employ stand-off through the use of chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) weapons to reduce the effectiveness and employability of these and other instruments of national power. By 2035 the Multi-Domain Army will transform the way we fight in order to: sustain the fight, expand the battlespace, strike in depth across domains, gain and maintain decision dominance, create overmatch, and prevail in large-scale combat.

Perhaps the most significant difference between applying multi-domain effects in the operational fight in forward theaters is that the Joint Force must be postured and ready forward with the full suite of capabilities. Given economic and political factors over the past four decades, reliance on required prepositioned stocks in theater or noncombatant evacuation plans may no longer be feasible, especially if adversaries claim air or sea superiority. Likewise, fighting state actors from a cold start by projecting power from the homeland over many months is no longer a viable course of action.