INFANTRY

A Prevailing Theme

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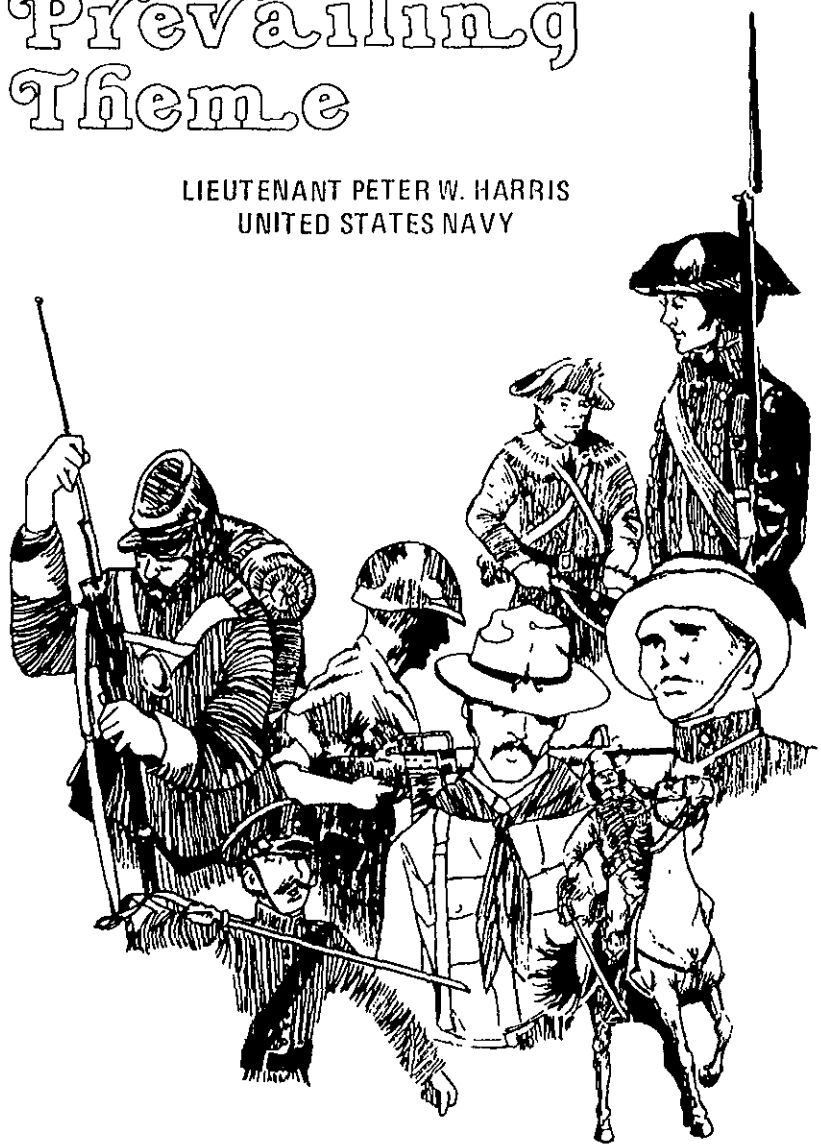


The Infantry has been around for a long time, longer than any other military arm, but it has not always been considered the Queen of Battle. In fact, over the centuries it has been alternately glorified and maligned, and its growth has been spasmodic rather than linear.

Various theories have been advanced to explain this cyclical development, but they have lacked a common theme. Some theories have held that the infantry simply shares the lot of the mass of the population at any given time, that only when man himself is afforded dignity by the social system is the infantry able to respond properly. Another theory is that the infantry is the democratic arm of the service and that wherever a democracy exists so does the man on foot.

Other theories attribute the rise and fall of the infantry to pure military science: the cavalry and feudal knights caused the use of infantry to decline. Still others cite technological innovations — the sword, the longbow, the pike, the rifle, and finally the machinegun — as the chief reasons for the various high points in the development of the infantry.

But there has to be a great deal more to it than these theories suggest. An analysis of the infantry's peaks and valleys may lead to a prevailing theme that can be used to explain the process of its development and also to suggest its future usefulness.

The graph shown here is offered as a point of departure for such an analysis. Although some might argue about the battles, wars, and practitioners selected for it, as well as about the specific points assigned to them, the graph should prove useful to the discussion.

Records indicate that in the Assyrian Empire (1500-600 B.C., the low point of the curve) men on foot were clearly subordinate to charioteers, and that combat was often waged on an individual basis by mounted kings and nobles. Later the foot soldier was assimilated into the

Persian military forces, treated as a slave, and often flogged into battle.

By the fifth century B.C., though, the plight of the infantryman was rapidly improving. With the ascendency of the Greek democratic city-state the man of foot had become a "hoplite," who was a free man and an aristocrat, and also a citizen-soldier who created his own laws. He fought side by side with his fellow infantrymen in a unit known as the phalanx, a hedgehog formation that relied on moral and physical solidarity. Its tactical strength and significance were evident at Marathon where its shock power completely routed the Persian host.

But the phalanx was not without its weaknesses. Its inherent solidity made it difficult to maneuver and exposed its flanks to attack. The great Theban general Epaminondas understood this, and his resulting remedy, the oblique order, enabled his outnumbered troops to defeat the Spartans at the battle of Leuctra.

Alexander the Great continued to improve the phalanx. After extending its range with a longer pike, he used it as a stable yet movable pivot upon which his cavalry could rapidly maneuver. Meanwhile, his light, mobile infantry served as the crucial hinge between the two forces and offered both protection and an offensive capability. The success of his war machine has been well-documented, and it may have reached its fruition at the battle of Arbela.

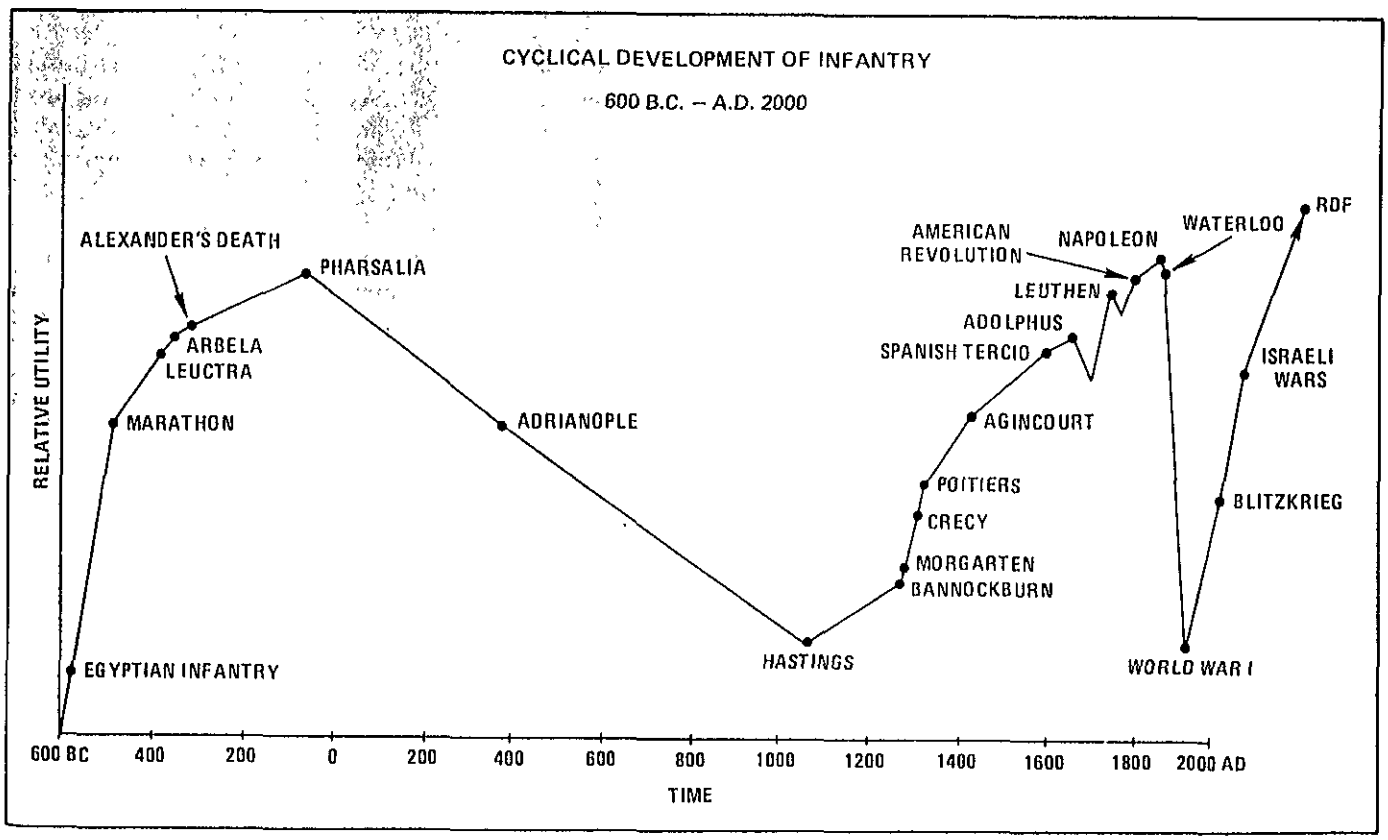
The infantry, though, had changed. It was no longer the hoplite who fought for his city-state or a member of the Sacred Band who swore allegiance to Epaminondas. Mercenaries had entered the ranks, and Greek civil wars ravaged the Aegean population. By the time Alexander died in 323 B.C., the phalanx was all but forgotten as swarming horsemen fought for succession. It was not until the Roman legion manifested itself that the infantry once again came to the forefront.

The legion was an extension of the phalanx in flexibility. Composed of three lines of smaller groups called manipules, and made up of Roman soldiers exclusively, it was fused together by discipline, training, and exercise. It proved its worth in many a battle, perhaps most dramatically at Pharsalia, where Caesar demonstrated that a thoroughly trained and confident infantry could defeat a superior mounted force.

Infantry dominated Roman warfare for the next four centuries, even though fissures began to appear throughout the empire. Training and discipline in the legions were soon undermined by a less rigid entry procedure, which included the admission of alien soldiers. Weak and profligate rulers, furthermore, lacked the mobile reserves necessary to protect their garrisons from marauding barbaric tribes. When the Gothic cavalry finally charged at Adrianople, they met little resistance. Forty thousand men perished in what history has described as a vicious bloodbath.

Adrianople symbolized more than the fall of the western Roman Empire. As the curve indicates, the infantry declined into impotency for a thousand years. As man entered the Dark Ages, his military energy was diverted to the creation and organization of the cavalry. In fact, most historians agree that in the last half of the ninth century local levies of infantrymen were actually discontinued and replaced by horsemen. The man on foot was reduced to doing menial camp tasks and taking part in an occasional siege.

The foot soldier did receive some notice at the battle of



Hastings. Although the Norman knights completed the triumph of cavalry over infantry, they did so only after King Harold's housecarls had proved themselves worthy opponents. Indeed, it seemed that if the foot-soldier only had better weapons and tactics, he might rise once more.

His prayers were answered in the 14th century with the advent of the English longbow and the Swiss pike. Together, they represented what the infantry had been missing since its rout at Adrianople: the principles of missile and shock. The curve reflects the infantry's restoration as a decisive arm from that point on. English knights were routed by Scottish pikemen at Bannockburn, and Swiss peasant infantry smashed the Hapsburg cavalry at Morgarten. Several decades later, French chivalry assured itself virtual extinction at the hands of English archers at Crecy, Poitiers, and Agincourt. But, for all the success of these bowmen and pikemen, they suffered from an inherent and inevitable limitation: a lack of military balance. The archers needed protection, and the pikemen needed mobility.

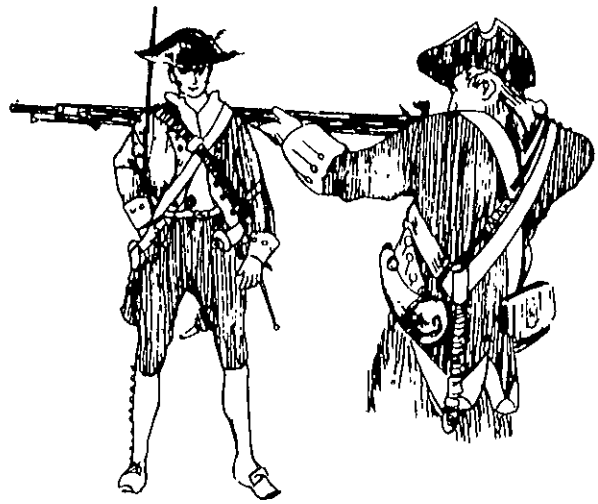
The Spanish solved this problem by combining the two branches into a single tactical unit called the tercio. With the development of firearms, archers disappeared and the ranks were equally divided between pikemen and musketeers. While the pike was used to repulse a cavalry charge, the musket's firepower enabled the infantry to attack. By 1600, the Spanish infantry had become not only self-sustaining but the dominant influence throughout Renaissance Europe.

But just as the Romans broke the Greek phalanx into maniples, so the Swedish tactician Gustavus Adolphus broke up the tercio. His legions were composed of specialized units deployed in a checkerboard fashion with musketeers outnumbering pikemen three to two. He continued to improve the musketeers' firepower by reducing the depth of their ranks, lightening their muskets, and introducing uniform cartridges for them. He also believed that morale and discipline were basic ingredients for a strong army. By using his highly motivated infantry in combination with his artillery and cavalry, he created one of the greatest armies in history.

So great was his influence on the foot soldier, in fact, that after his death in 1632 the importance of the infantry declined, and cavalry once again ruled the day as Cromwell and Turenne trained their mounted troops to be the exclusive striking arm. It was not until a new weapon and a certain Prussian practitioner arrived in the middle of the 18th century that the infantry finally regained its dominance.

FREDERICK

The new weapon was the socket bayonet, and its subsequent use permitted the infantry of musketeers and pikemen to be combined into one cohesive unit. Frederick the Great came along and demonstrated how drill and discipline could transform this unit into an automaton of maneuverability and firepower. Indeed, under his instruction, the steps of loading a musket were



practiced in such endless detail that his men could fire five rounds a minute as compared to two or three fired by soldiers in other armies. In addition, he developed light infantry troops for scouting and skirmishing as well as horse artillery to provide added firepower. Discipline among his soldiers was so severe that he often boasted that they were more afraid of his officers than of the enemy. As a result, his troops were highly effective.

Frederick's greatest victory came at Leuthen when his oblique order shattered the entrenched Austrians. The battle remains an epoch in military history where masking, mobility, precision, and surprise were fully implemented. It also marked the final demise of cavalry because of Frederick's obsession with firepower. The horse had simply become too large a target for a well-trained infantry.

Ironically, the potency of firepower also changed the infantry, which had become vulnerable in its traditional phalangeal formations. Across the ocean, for instance, the precise drill and columns sometimes came up against American colonists who had adopted flexible Indian tactics to harass the rigid lines of the British.

The effect of the American Revolution on the legitimacy of linear tactics also had a profound influence on Napoleon, who immediately embraced this new strategy, effectively using skirmishers to prepare the final advance of his columns. But as the Napoleonic Wars drained the resources of France, and as Napoleon began to rely more on his artillery, the man on foot was again gradually pushed into the background.

The infantry continued this slide well into the 19th century. In Europe, conservative generals who could not shake off their parade-ground mentality watched helplessly as their conventional columns were decimated by superior firepower.

In World War I the infantry succumbed to a new weapon, the machinegun. No longer did the infantryman probe for open flanks when frontal assaults became useless. Instead, he dug in and merely occupied ground that the artillery had conquered. From medieval camp follower to housecarl at Hastings to modern barrage

follower, the man on foot had ultimately completed his second cycle and reached another low point on the curve.

It was during World War II, Korea, and Vietnam that the foot soldier gradually became modern, mobile and mechanized. Along with the development of the German blitzkreig, he was being dropped by parachute, landed in special amphibious craft, and supported by low-flying tactical aircraft. Linear warfare was discarded for infiltration tactics, with platoons moving in assault echelon. He gained ground by using superior firepower and was often supported by tanks and artillery.

But the nuclear era did not make his war any less personal. Battles were still fought on his level, and it was ultimately his courage and his intuitive guile that produced final victory.

What conclusions can be drawn from the history of infantry as shown on the curve? Previous theories that have

explained the rise and fall of infantry neglected the art of war as it was conducted by its greatest practitioners, and this disregard has confused and clouded the issue. I see the common elements of the peaks and valleys in the development of infantry as being simply a case of leverage.

CHENG AND CH'I

The dominant and prevailing theme, then, in this rise and fall seems to be related to Sun Tzu's tactics of cheng and ch'i. The Chinese philosopher described the former as a holding power and the latter as forcing a decision by flanking or encircling. I contend that infantry has always been essentially a cheng and that it has been successful only when accompanied by the ch'i. There have been isolated cases, of course, in which the cheng has been strong enough to exist without the ch'i — Swiss pikemen, for example — but usually the two must exist together. Alexander's army is a perfect illustration. While his phalanx (the cheng) gripped the enemy by the throat, his cavalry (the ch'i) would swing in with the knock-out blow.

In fact, the entire infantry curve can be viewed through this lens of fix and maneuver. When both were present, such as at Arbela and Austerlitz, the infantry gained decisiveness as an arm. When this maneuverability disappeared, infantry was less useful. The "troughs" of the curve created by Adrianople and by the Maginot mentality of World War I show that the infantry had lost its mobility and, with it, its ability to maneuver.

Skeptics would argue that this theory presupposes a supporting arm, whether artillery or cavalry, and that the infantry as a detached arm has little or no importance. But military analysts usually classify an offensive force as one that combines four elements — mobility, protection, striking power, and holding power. Clearly, cavalry and artillery can provide a strike capability, but the infantry with its inherent capacity for occupying a large area is indispensable in conquering an enemy. Furthermore, infantry that has been able to combine all four elements has been the most successful.

History has proved this point. The Greeks, with no artillery or cavalry, achieved near perfection at Marathon and Leuctra, both classic examples of cheng and ch'i, to gain leverage over an opponent. In more modern times the German blitzkrieg exploited the subtleties of Sun Tzu's tactics through deception and surprise. It successfully weakened the enemy with quick thrusts and finally maneuvered to shatter his will to resist. The combination of cheng and ch'i in this respect is more than a fix and maneuver game. It is a philosophy of the indirect approach, a conflict in which a unit never knows from which direction it is going to be hit next. It is this infinite ability to deliver combinations of punches that makes cheng and ch'i such a menacing threat. Warfare is no longer just physical; it has also become a mental and moral struggle.

I maintain that loyalty to these principles of deception and surprise has distinguished the great leaders of the past and made them artists rather than merely artisans of warfare. The points on the curve reflect this loyalty, and the lack of it. Napoleon's rise and fall, for example, is predicated primarily on the application of cheng and ch'i. In his early campaigns he cloaked his plans, generated misinformation, and followed up his dispersed components with tactical concentrations. It was only when he started to rely on his heavy artillery that he became rigid and predictable. As Wellington said of Waterloo, "Napoleon did not maneuver at all. He just moved forward in the old style and was driven off in the old style." Napoleon's defeat was perhaps inevitable when he departed from cheng and ch'i.

Certainly technological and sociological developments have also contributed to the highs and the lows in the development of infantry. The advent of improved weapon systems, for example, has helped redefine the infantry's role in combat over the years. But, unfortunately, historians have tended to overemphasize the role of science and to completely ignore the operational side of warfare, and herein lies the problem. By neglecting strategy and tactics, they have given us a false representation of infantry's usefulness.

Despite these other influences, the philosophy of cheng and ch'i does seem to be the prevailing theme. It has been around for more than two thousand years, and whether fidelity to it at various times has been conscious or accidental, the infantry leaders who have incorporated its basic concepts have been the most successful.

IMPLICATIONS

But does this ancient philosophy of Sun Tzu's have any implications in modern combat? And if it is really a prevailing theme, will it continue to be valid in the future? The answer on both counts is a most emphatic yes. In fact, the concept is very much alive today, though disguised under a new label — maneuver warfare. It has sparked a new debate, in fact, on the employment of maneuver versus attrition. Which side will win in a showdown is naturally a question of primary concern.

But the answer seems clear. Since the average U.S. infantryman can expect to go into battle outnumbered and, on a weapon-for-weapon basis, outgunned, it seems ludicrous to have him engaged in an attrition contest. Only the side with material superiority can afford to do that The Israeli campaigns against her neighbors certainly demonstrate this point quite convincingly.

Unfortunately, and although the Vietnam experience demonstrated the folly of attrition, the U.S. still seems to have delusions of material superiority. The fact is that most military analysts still cling to that old myth that hardware is first. Only when we return to Sun Tzu's concept of the direct and indirect approach can we understand that warfare is primarily a mental conflict and that to win without fighting is the essence of skill.

The U.S. response to the various threats it may have to face around the world is its Rapid Deployment Force (RDF), but its potential use remains a mystery. The Joint Chiefs of Staff are no doubt asking the same question that Alexander asked at Arbela and that Caesar asked at Pharsalia: How does an inferior force defeat a larger one? The answer is that it finds a way to distract the enemy and at the same time deliver a death blow to his flank or rear, which is the essence of cheng and ch'i.

The present RDF, however, is incapable of executing such an offensive philosophy. What is needed is a small, agile, tactically capable intervention force, governed by a single, unified command supported by sea power and similar to today's U.S. Marine Corps. The battalions assigned would be the elite of the elite, a modern infantry with not only protection and mobility but a holding and a striking power as well. The foot soldier in its ranks would define a new apex on the curve and establish a whole new dimension in the development of infantry. Such a force would represent a hand-picked infantry that sought to revive the real infantry tradition of the phalanx, the legion, the tercio, the French column, and the art of maneuver warfare.

One thing remains certain. The passage of time may have revolutionized the battlefield, but infantry's presence and principles remain unchanged. When the smoke cleared from the bomb craters on the Ho Chi Minh trail, it was the American foot soldier who ultimately closed with the enemy and rooted out the obstinate defender.

In the future, as in the past, the infantry forces that adhere most closely to Sun Tzu's concept of cheng and ch'i will form new high points on the curve of infantry development.

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