



Light Infantry

in perspective

Light infantry can refer to two distinctly different types of troops. In the United States the term is commonly applied to standard infantry units that have been made lighter through reduced equipment and support. Such formations do have improved strategic mobility, but in most other respects they are identical to regular infantry, including the tactics they use and the quality of their soldiers. Although this type of infantry is often called "elite," that title is merely a name if its tactics and the quality of its troops are essentially like the tactics and the troops of regular infantry units.

In Europe, however, the term "elite" has different connotations. Generally, it is applied to *high quality*, non-mechanized infantry units. In the Germanic coun-

tries it implies a true elite, with specially selected and trained men, lighter formations than more "conventional" light infantry has, a demanding operational method, and a tactical repertoire keyed to surprise and to fighting in close terrain. Though it lacks heavy support weapons, this type of light infantry unit, paradoxically, has been equipped traditionally with a high proportion of mortars and light machineguns. Thus, it has much greater firepower than either regular or "conventional" light infantry. The principal characteristics of European, or classical, light infantry and of standard infantry made light by removing heavy weapons and equipment are shown in the accompanying chart.

The origins of this modern day light infantry are

German. Unlike its neighbors — France and the low countries — Germany has little open terrain, except in the North German Plain. Southern Germany, Austria, and Switzerland are extensively forested and often mountainous. Because these areas are less suitable for formal tactics than open areas, it was natural for a special, more irregular infantry to develop in them. At the same time, it was recognized that the individuals in these units had to be more independent and aggressive than those in the more traditional units. Accordingly, these soldiers were drawn from a higher social class and were mainly reservists.

Historically, standing armies have been recruited from the available manpower — the lower classes and the idle aristocracy. These were shaped into fighting units by drill. The classic example is the Prussian Army. Under Frederick the Great, this army was virtually a labor gang; yet through rigorous training and discipline, it was capable of clockwork precision and could outdrill and outvolley all other armies of the period. Indeed, its close-order line tactics became the model for many other armies.

Every system, however, has its antithesis and for Frederick's close-order drill tactics, the antithesis was irregular infantry. Even Frederick reluctantly recognized this reality and organized some irregular infantry units of his own. Because of their source of recruitment, though, his *Jaeger* units remained special units and were not integrated into the main forces. Thus, they had no significant effect on warfare until World War I.

The antithesis of 18th century close-order European line infantry tactics actually came from America, and American light tactics led to a new synthesis, commonly known as Napoleonic tactics. Over the next century, these tactics (because of firepower) became line tactics again, but this time took the form of extended (dispersed) or open-order linear deployments. On a battlefield that was dominated by firepower — where firepower itself proved inadequate in restoring movement and indeed was much of the problem — the breakdown of these linear

tactics led to a new tactical synthesis and this synthesis produced a new irregularity: Ludendorff's elastic defense and *Hutier* attack tactics. These were consolidated and merged into the Moltkean operational framework during the 1920s to form a synthesis known as *Blitzkrieg*.

The German doctrinal innovations of World War I (the elastic defense and *Hutier* infiltration tactics) were essentially identical to classical *Jaeger* tactics (though not derived from them). Erwin Rommel, in his *Infantry Attacks*, demonstrated his employment of *Hutier*-like tactics in France in 1914 and later throughout the war. As a Captain in the Wurtemberg *Gebirgsjaeger* Battalion, Rommel commanded the lead companies in the 1917 Caporetto offensive, which nearly knocked Italy out of the war.

Jaeger tactics were far from being in the mainstream of German military thought and had little or no influence on the development of *Hutier* tactics, but the point is moot. What is important is the manner in which the *Jaegers* had become the cutting edge of the main force infantry in close terrain (as at Caporetto and in the Carpathians). Conversely, in open terrain, where no *Jaegers* were deployed, special thrust troops (*Stosstruppen*) were formed as special cutting edge elements and the army as a whole became infused with the micro-tactics of the *Jaeger*.

LITTLE CHANGE

Although the German conceptual approach to war has undergone remarkably little change in this century, the implementation of that approach has changed in two important aspects: The extension of the concepts of *Schwerpunkt* (center of gravity) and *Auftragstaktik* (mission-type orders) to lower and lower command levels; and the need to create flanks, or discover gaps, in extended linear deployments, instead of searching for open flanks that no longer existed. Thus, the classical German encirclement, while still an ultimate goal of an

<u>Characteristic</u>	<u>European Light</u>	<u>Standard Light</u>
Defensive tactics	Does not hold ground.	Holds ground.
Offensive tactics	Seeks, on its own, targets of opportunity within the scope of a given mission. Stalks the enemy.	Unit usually employed at the direction of a higher commander against a prescribed target.
Command and Control	Decentralized decisions made by small unit leaders.	Centralized; fights en masse.
Organization	Integrates different weapons within small units.	Individual units employ large numbers of similar weapons.
Discipline	Demands initiative.	Demands obedience.
Quality of Personnel	Intelligent, capable of independent thought. Highly skilled in field craft and stalking.	Obedient.
Method of Operation	Fluid in ever-changing situations.	Setpiece with accustomed drill.

operation, had to be preceded by a search for soft spots (*Die Lucken und Flachentaktik*) through which a penetration could be effected.

All armies other than Germany's viewed the new potentials and capabilities of radio and telephone communications as a means of strengthening control over dispersed forces, and those of transport as a means of concentrating and prestocking artillery ammunition for breakthroughs. Only the Germans realized during World War I that the new conditions of spatial dispersment and dominating firepower required the opposite of centralization — command from the bottom up. This meant that junior officers on the spot had to make immediate tactical decisions. At the same time, improved radio equipment could be used to monitor the activities of smaller units, to help sense developing opportunities, and to reorient assigned tasks to conform to changing circumstances.

A unit's plans could be less formal and rigid and therefore less vulnerable to complete disruption in the face of the unexpected; indeed, a unit might even convert the unexpected to its own advantage. Removing the need for rigid plans; elaborate, pre-conceived movements; and detailed coordination had the effect of also removing the inconsistency in the German command and control system between local initiative and preconceived maneuver. In addition, there was now less need for the local buildups of men and material that often made surprise impossible.

These changes also meant that all the infantry units in the *Reichsheer*, in effect, had to adopt *Jaeger* micro-tactics. All infantry tactics — delay, defense, and attack — became ways of setting up a "smashing" blow. Today, German foot infantry still occupies positions in delay and defense, but in the *Jaeger* scheme this is less for defense itself than for drawing an enemy force into firepockets and exposing its vulnerable rear and flanks to thrusting counterstrokes (hammer and anvil tactics). In the attack, reconnaissance elements search for gaps and soft spots in the enemy's line across a broad front. If gaps cannot be found, penetrations are then made in the softest spots on a very narrow front accompanied by surprise, which is achieved through stealth and deception and through the use of suppressing firepower. Frontal assaults are avoided, and openings are exploited by reserves echeloned in depth and trailing in the wake of the wedging-in force. These reserves have the dual mission of rolling up the enemy's immediate flanks and penetrating deeper into his defensive system.

For *Jaegers*, a successful attack depends on maintaining high-tempo operations. Without that tempo a small force operating in the midst of a larger enemy force can be either exposed to superior firepower or pinned in place and subsequently destroyed in detail. A high-tempo operation fractures an opponent, preempts and avoids his reactions, and thereby grants security to a small force. Through high-tempo operations, small units can begin the disintegration of an enemy formation and neutralize

its actions until the main force arrives.

Jaeger-like combat strives for stealth and stalking, the tactic of the big-game hunter; the Germans have simply extended the concept from individual hunters to groups of hunters in forests, and, finally, to warfare in general. The greatest problems are in finding suitable techniques.

In woods, mountains, and other close terrain, the techniques are those of the hunter and tracker; the problem there is in how to instill the requisite levels of skill and self-confidence in the individual and the small unit.

Techniques for open terrain are far more difficult to devise and implement. In World War I, the German tactics of 1916-1918 provided one answer. In defense, regular infantry could create a reasonable facsimile of stealth and stalking tactics on a large scale through the elastic defense (based on rear slope positions), enfilading fire from mutually supporting machinegun posts, and



lightly-held outposts designed to draw in the attacker to the ground chosen for the counterstroke by reserve forces. (Indeed, the familiar American tactic of area defense was largely copied in form from the German system.)

Thus the German tradition that some identify as maneuver warfare, which took new form between the two world wars, can be conveniently summarized as a combination of stealth and stalking micro-tactics and high-tempo operations. The former leads to localized battlefield successes; the latter is a means of converting tactical success into operational success by acting faster than the enemy can react (a phenomenon currently referred to in U.S. literature as the "Boyd Cycle").

But tempo is more than mere speed of movement.

Movement itself is often associated with, and mistaken for, true maneuver, but it is not necessarily a condition for maneuver. Often, the enemy's own movements will set the scene for the smashing counterstroke while friendly movements subsequently follow through and exploit any tactical advantage.

The closest U.S. analogy to this type of light infantry unit would be a reinforced Ranger battalion, sometimes grouped with other Ranger battalions into larger elements. The Swedes, Finns, and Austrians have, in addition to their main light infantry units, many special battalions trained to operate independently behind enemy lines within assigned "rooms," a practice called *Jagdkampf* (or raid tactics). These troops resort to partisan-style hit-and-run tactics, including ambushes against the enemy's soft rear echelons, and they also provide intelligence and target acquisition data for the main forces. While U.S. Rangers have some of the characteristics of European light infantry units, they are oriented more toward one specialized aspect of those tactics — such as a combat patrol or a raid and return — and not toward the entire operational method.

Firepower has dominated the battlefield for more than a century. Infantry has, in fact, survived several centuries of warfare only by adapting to that firepower, mainly by reducing the number of ranks it used and extending the frontage of its formations. The limit to further adaptation in this manner was reached in World War I when, to protect itself from the devastation of artillery fires, infantry had to disperse *spatially* instead of *linearly*. Accordingly, the main body of troops was moved back from the forward positions to shield the soldiers from artillery observers. The forward areas, in turn, became a covering zone occupied by mutually supporting small outposts.

Spatial dispersion did protect the defender from the opponent's firepower; by contrast, it fully exposed the attacker to both direct and indirect fires as he advanced over open terrain with recourse only to hasty cover. Regardless of the volume and duration of its artillery support, the attacking infantry units, using standard methods, could not overcome this disparity in protection to break the defender's line. At best, they could push it back, although at great cost to themselves. The attacker's firepower could not overcome the defender, but the defender could sweep the open battlefield with artillery and machinegun fire. Maneuver was impossible — there were no open flanks to turn, and no penetrations could be effected for creating new flanks.

In the end, although firepower could not break the defense, its antithesis, stealth and stalking, could. At best, these achieved decisive surprise; at worst, they gave the defender elusive targets, because in the process of reducing its vulnerability to artillery through spatial dispersion, defending infantry had created a new set of vulnerabilities. The defense could handle *overt* attacks by smashing them with artillery and machineguns. *Covert* attacks, on the other hand, gave the defender no distinct targets. As a result, attackers often succeeded in under-

mining the structure of the defense before their significance could be recognized. Small, infiltrating battle groups succeeded where massed artillery and wave assaults failed. Less artillery was required in the attack, and artillery was much less effective in the defense.

This phenomenon is analogous to the breakdown of Prussian linear drill tactics by the new skirmishing and column tactics of the French revolutionary armies. Dispersed and elusive (high quality) light infantry units, by disrupting the ordered ranks of regular infantry units, created the conditions for columns of ordinary infantry to penetrate lines that were over-extended. This time, however, instead of being supplanted and eventually merged into the line to take the form of extended linear tactics, the light infantry itself became the basis for infantry tactics.

Today, firepower still dominates the modern battlefield, but infantry continues to survive against it by subverting its effects through dispersion and elusiveness and can now overcome it by deception and surprise. Dispersion is possible because small units can now protect themselves; they can generate considerable firepower with their own weapons and can tap electronically into various fire support systems. Dispersion protects the infantry by reducing its detectability and target size, thereby contributing to elusiveness and ambiguity. This makes targeting difficult, except by area saturation fires, which are often impractical because of the large amount of ammunition needed. Indeed, the attempt to counter elusiveness by weight of firepower alone soon leads to exhaustion.

Operationally, elusiveness and ambiguity lead to deception and surprise. These conditions, in turn, set the conditions for attacking and counterattacking on the modern battlefield. Attackers who cannot create deception and surprise will pay a high price in breaking through the enemy's front.

Among European countries, light infantry has now replaced conventional infantry because the latter is suited neither to modern warfare nor to contingency warfare. Infantry can no longer survive through the mere expedient of digging-in, because known static positions can be smashed by heavy artillery. Positional infantry can be outflanked in open terrain by armor and in close terrain by light infantry. In static combat, even on its own terms, regular infantry is no longer practical; whether in open or close terrain, it can be infiltrated, its units wedged apart, and the whole defeated in detail.

In short, then, non-mechanized infantry on the modern battlefield can survive and attack only through dispersion, elusiveness, and ambiguity — conditions that require light infantry.

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