

Thinking About



Light Infantry

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EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is an adaptation of a talk given by the author at Fort Benning earlier this year.

The term "light infantry," like "light horse," has always tended to irritate the military ear with its rather attractive musical ring. This was particularly true in the period following the South African War (1899-1902), during which conflict the dash and tactical prowess of Boer mounted infantry, commandos, field cornetcies, and corporalships made a lasting impression upon British imperial arms. A Montreal veteran of that struggle, the late Brigadier A. Hamilton Gault, in applying in August 1914 for a charter to raise the last privately sponsored regiment in the British Empire, let it be known that he personally preferred "light horse" in the name of the cavalry unit he originally proposed because it had an "irregular tang" to it. As there was a far greater demand for unmounted troops by this time, however, he agreed to settle for "Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry," the term "Light Infantry" being included as "vaguely applicable" to the force initially contemplated in his draft proposal.

By the last half of Queen Victoria's reign, of course, names such as *light infantry*, *rifles*, *fusiliers*, and *grenadiers* had ceased to have any real meaning in the armies of the British and Indian empires. The dominance of the rifle had, in fact, placed the general purpose infantryman in a position of ascendancy on the battlefield. This was perhaps the inevitable result of a military

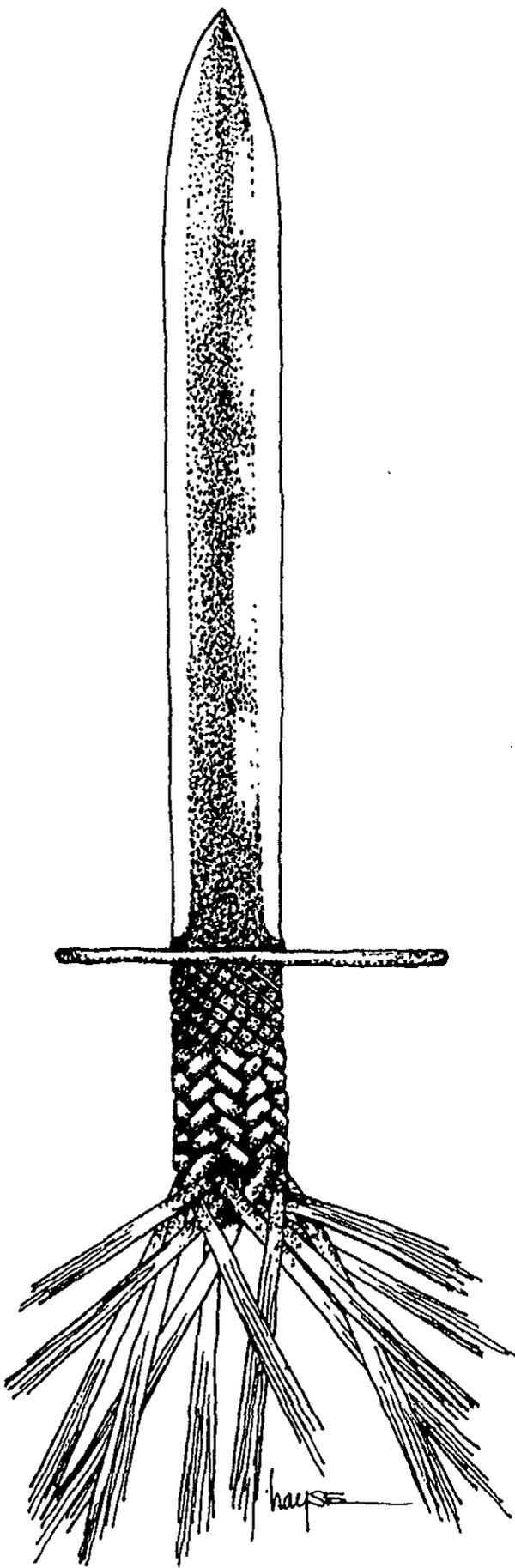
progression that had been originally spearheaded by the rifle regiments, which at one time were armed with rifles while the rest of the army had muskets. Fusiliers, for their part, were light infantry of an even earlier era; armed with a fusil — a light flintlock as opposed to a matchlock musket — they were used to guard artillery and encamped battalions. Grenadiers, in their time the elite of the infantry, had been specially selected soldiers who possessed the height and strength to hurl hand grenades with great accuracy and effect. But such names had been retained because of a strong historical tradition, and there continued to be tall grenadiers long after grenades went out of fashion. (By World War I, the term *grenadier* had so changed in meaning that when the grenade throwers returned to the battlefield there were objections to calling them grenadiers and they became known as *bomb-ers* instead.)

Obviously, the infantry, constantly marching hand in hand with technology over all nature of ground, has been forced to appear in many forms and guises, several of them reincarnations, on successive battlefields. One suspects, nonetheless, that the appeal of light infantry lies as much in its psychical as in its physical dimensions. Light infantry tradition is rooted, for instance, in revolutions in thought, discipline, and officer-man relationships as well as in tactics, uniform, and equipment.

Historically, by the 1740s, the tactics of the European infantry of the line, based on volley fire, had become so rigid and mechanical that a need developed for skirmishing and scouting troops who could shoot accurately at individual targets and who could use ground to reconnoiter and to delay. The first large-scale appearance of light troops occurred during the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-1748) when Maria Theresa called upon her Borderers — "wild Croats and Pandours!" who had been part of Austrian frontier defenses against the Turks — to defend her realm from northern and western threats. Early in 1741 more than 30,000 of these troops made their appearance on the battlefields of central Europe. Their effectiveness, which decreased substantially after their initial appearance, led other powers to introduce or build up similar forces. Significantly, many German states began to deploy companies of *jaeger*, or game-keepers from the boar and deer hunts of the great forests, who were first-class woodsmen as well as crack shots with rifled arms.

The British Army had no light troops to speak of until certain line battalions serving in America during the 1750s raised some ad hoc light companies, because most active and prescient soldiers saw a need, as one such soldier put it, "to adopt some system for meeting on their own terms, but with the advantages of discipline, the Indians and the backwoods man." It remained, however, for Generals Wolfe and Amherst, both of whom used bodies of marksmen often armed with rifles, to actually introduce the widespread use of "light" or "rifle" infantry within the British Army.

In the wilderness of the North American frontier,



meanwhile, the sharpshooting tradition of the *jaeger* had already found new expression, the German and Swiss gunsmiths of Pennsylvania having transformed the rifles of their homelands into the long "American" rifle. British, European, and American developments in light units, therefore, were all fused in 1756 when many of these same Pennsylvania immigrants were formed into the Royal American Regiment, later the 60th Rifles. From this unit sprang the King's Royal Rifle Corps (today part of The Royal Greenjackets) and, less directly, their affiliated regiment, the Queen's Own Rifles of Canada.

A resurgence of British Army interest in light infantry occurred during the French revolutionary wars, when in 1797 Frederick, Duke of York, began to reform the light troops. This was in direct response to the extreme skill in skirmishing exhibited by the French, who in their early battles were able to inflict heavy losses on opposing line infantry without having to commit their own to close combat. Again, German influence was felt as Major General Baron de Rottenburg's *Regulations for the Exercise of Riflemen and Light Infantry* was published in English translation in 1798 and used to devise a light infantry drill system. General Sir John Moore, who was appointed by the Duke of York in 1803 to command Shorncliffe Camp, acknowledged that he used the book as his "groundwork" in the tactical training of the Light Division for the Peninsular War.

The King's Royal Rifle Corps and the newly created 95th Regiment (later the Rifle Brigade) formed the nucleus of this green-clad rifle force, which came to dominate not only French *tirailleurs* and *voltigeurs* but, in the words of one witness, the Peninsular Army itself:

When the Light Division joined the army at Talavera it had not been engaged with the enemy, while the army it joined had been engaged on the Douro and the Tagus, yet was inferior in discipline for war, seeing that its picquets were often in scrapes and at Talavera a brigade had been surprised. But the men of the Light Division, though new to war, were looked up to from the day of junction as the veterans of the army! And by their discipline they sustained that character throughout the war, committing no blunders

Sir John Moore's major qualification for command lay in his ability to awaken the faculties of those under him by inspiring and teaching. The secret to his training system, of course, was in its approach to discipline and motivation. "The service of light infantry," he wrote, "does not so much require men of stature as it requires them to be intelligent, hardy, and active." He believed the essential thing that was needed was not a new drill but a new discipline, a new spirit that aimed at replacing a mechanical instrument with a living organism.

Moore's whole system was one of developing rather than suppressing intelligence, of making the training of the men contribute to the effective unity of the whole, of enlisting the zeal of the private as much as of the officer. Self-discipline fashioned on the role-model, with its em-

phasis on the prevention instead of the punishment of crime, underscored Moore's methodology. The light infantryman who was capable of fighting in open order under less direct supervision was, in effect, the harbinger of the general purpose infantryman of the future.

TRENCH WARFARE

The domination of the battlefield by foot infantry receded as the relative power of the rifle ebbed during World War I, in the course of which high commands variously persisted in attempting to fight the battle with the target. The trench warfare that ensued also produced a specialized infantry of bombers and bayonet-men who often preferred to resort to maces and war clubs. Hopelessly addicted to massive artillery barrages, they had forgotten how to deliver accurate rifle fire and failed to appreciate how to employ light machineguns to fight their own way forward when artillery support ceased.

The Germans' introduction of elite storm trooper units, organized around the basic *gruppe* with its own base of fire in a four-man light machinegun *trupp* and assault element in a seven-man *stosstrupp*, must thus be regarded as among the most significant of infantry developments. With a low ratio of men to weapons and a high quality of junior leadership, the *sturmmtruppen* ultimately set the standard for the remainder of the German infantry. Established storm units like *Sturmbataillon Rohr* served as training cadres, teaching storm unit techniques and the new infiltration tactics to selected small unit leaders. These leaders, in turn, established storm units in their own formations. It is interesting to note, though, that General Erich von Ludendorff, who eagerly embraced this tactical solution to the impasse of trench warfare, very much regretted the counter-productive 1918 decision to divide frontline troops into "storm" and "trench" divisions.

In many respects the German *sturmmtruppen* manifested certain traits traditionally associated with light infantry: They exploited surprise, moved fast, employed stealth, shot straight, and were capable of independent and highly individual performance. Although they were special troops and obviously well-trained, they were not really specialists but rather all-round soldiers who were capable of doing many things. They also represented an essentially intellectual, as opposed to a technological, solution to an existing operational problem. Similarly, in World War II, two relatively modern forms of special troops — mountain troops and airborne forces — were introduced to capitalize upon or resolve particular military situations.

This conflict, in fact, saw the biggest build-up of mountain troops in history. By 1944, for example, the German forces included nine *Wehrmacht* and six *Waffen-SS* mountain divisions; they also had under their command numerous allied mountain divisions. Because they were highly versatile, these divisions not only oper-

ated in the mountainous regions of Norway, the Mediterranean, and the Caucasus, but were found to be the most effective type of force for sustained combat in the forests and swamps of Russia.

Interestingly, German mountain battalions and companies had twice as many machineguns and mortars as comparable standard American infantry units had, with only two-thirds as much manpower at company level. In the view of Steven L. Canby, who has written extensively on military strategy and tactics, mountain troops definitely fall into the category of "classic light infantry," which, he argues, is "an infantry qualitatively distinct from that of the 82d Airborne or the new directions of the 9th Division."

Airborne forces, of course, also made their debut in strength during World War II. The German feat of capturing an island — Crete, which was defended by 39,000 troops — with an airborne force never larger than 15,000 men and initially without any artillery, heavy weapons, or vehicles remains one of the greatest feats in military history (the critical air-landing of the 5th Mountain Division notwithstanding). Due to their severe losses, however — 5,670, mostly in the 7th Airborne Division — the Germans did not undertake another major airborne operation during the war.

The Soviets for their part, despite being the first to experiment with the airborne idea, in the initial stages of the war, did not seem willing to leave so many picked infantrymen inactive for long periods. Later, nonetheless, they did undertake a number of significant combined parachute and air-landed operations (two each of about 10,000 men) west of the Urals. While all of the major operations conducted by the Soviets failed to achieve their objectives, many of their small-scale insertions were effective.

Anglo-American airborne operations, on the other hand, were conducted on a more successful and grander scale, but there are some who still argue that the British airborne program, much too large for the available airlift, was essentially a waste. Airborne divisions spent too much time out of action (the 1st Division, for example, was in reserve from June through September 1944), and potentially good combat leaders who might otherwise have improved the effectiveness of line infantry units were, in reality, left out of combat.

This last point deserves some expansion, since it has some direct effects on the proliferation of specialist combat troops generally. The commander of the U.S. Army Ground Forces in World War II, Lieutenant General L.J. McNair, contended that "specialist-type" training "almost invariably taught particular skills ('tricks') at the expense of general military proficiency," and he stressed "the futility of perfecting men in the techniques of skis, gliders, or landing craft if after meeting the enemy they were not competent all-around soldiers." General William Slim of the British Indian Army was also much opposed to forming specialist forces, with the exception of airborne units — forces that would drain high quality

manpower from the line infantry units. In his opinion:

The result of these . . . special units was undoubtedly to lower the quality of the rest of the Army, especially of the infantry, not only by skimming the cream off it, but by encouraging the idea that certain of the normal operations of war were so difficult that only specially equipped corps d'elite could be expected to undertake them. Armies do not win wars by means of a few bodies of super-soldiers but by the average quality of their standard units The level of initiative, individual training, and weapon skill required in, say, a commando, is admirable; what is not admirable is that it should be confined to a few small units. Any well-trained infantry battalion should be able to do what a commando can do.

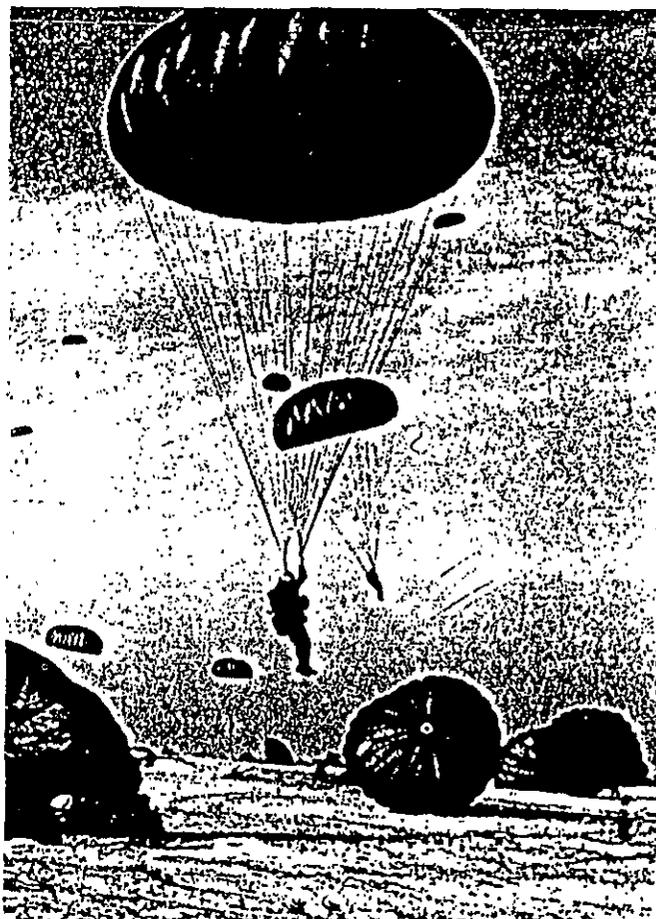
TWO FORMS

As when there were pikemen and musketeers, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) today recognizes two forms of infantry: "light" or non-armored infantry that, ground- or helicopter-mobile, fights dismounted and is suited for combat in terrain where tanks cannot deploy; and "heavy," or armored infantry, that with high mobility, armor protection, and the ability to work within a system of armored combat troops, can fight either mounted or dismounted. In short, infantry riding in armored personnel carriers (APCs) or mechanized infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs) able to keep pace with and support the mobile armored battle belong to the latter category, while parachute, airtransportable, mountain, lorried, and foot infantry belong to the former.

According to the former commander of NATO's Central Army Group, General Frederick J. Kroesen, "the infantry that General Patton knew and valued so highly came in but three categories: paratroopers for dislocating enemy defenses against deep envelopments; light infantry to clear, reconnoiter and protect; and mechanized infantry to accompany his tanks during exploitation or counter-attack." What many people tend now to forget, in Kroesen's view, is that "most of the divisions involved in the greatest battles of World War II were light infantry."

If the matter of employing light infantry today remains a somewhat bewildering subject, it may in part be directly related to the basic confusion over the role of infantry generally. At least one author — D.M.O. Miller — has already argued in *Military Technology and Economics* (May-June 1979) that "one of the most fundamental questions in modern warfare" is that of "the proper role and use of the infantry." No less an authority than the late Colonel John Weeks felt compelled to write in the same issue, "It is very difficult to produce a precise definition of the role of infantry and the best that can be done is to outline the various tasks that the infantry are called upon to fulfill"

The failure of Soviet infantry units to keep up with



their tanks during World War II was a major, if not a decisive, factor in the relative tactical successes won by the *Wehrmacht*. It also undoubtedly figured, however, in the 1967 introduction of the world's first true infantry fighting vehicle, the BMP. Apparently having learned from the Germans that mobile infantry is an equal and essential partner of a tank crew force, the Soviets identified the need for infantrymen to be able to fight mounted from under armor in support of both tanks and the primary weapons of their own IFVs.

Like their precursors, the *panzergrenadiers* of the Third Reich, Soviet motor rifle troops tended to become a distinct and independent arm in their own right. During the great BMP controversy of the mid-1970s, it was even postulated that motor rifle forces, with artillery and air support, could carry out a series of slashing raids deep into an enemy's rear area. The effects of antitank guided missiles (ATGMs) during the 1973 Yom Kippur War, though, increased the vulnerability of the BMP, which the Israelis judged to be an 11-man coffin. (Certainly a hit from any primary surface-to-surface or air-to-surface antitank warhead will disrupt the vehicle and probably disable all the men in it.) In short, a BMP-mounted strike force is too light for a high intensity environment (likely one reason the Soviets substantially boosted the number of tanks in their motor rifle divisions), and motor rifle troops are now back to performing their primary task of helping tanks get forward.

It has been accepted, of course, that intimate tank sup-

port is a proper role for infantry, the "in house" or *Hausinfanterie* kind, the value of which was appreciated by both Germans and Russians on the Eastern Front and the neglect of which almost cost the Israelis the 1973 war. But whether such armored infantry should constitute the bulk of an army's infantry component and dictate its fighting doctrine is debatable. Indeed, this is perhaps the crux of the infantry problem, because it poses dilemmas such as whether the soldier should fight mounted or dismounted, what the optimum IFV armament should be, and the importance of traditional infantry skills, not to mention costs in money and technical manpower. Brigadier Richard Simpkin, for instance, regrets that the cavalryman has to worship a metal box instead of a horse. To him, the "mechanized infantry," or *panzergrenadier*, concept as it is today "stands for an ideal which lacks both a doctrine and a cult object and is thus open to truly Orwellian levels of double-think and double-speak." He argues that:

... the same men, whether marching, bundled into "battle taxis," mounted in Marders, hoisted in helicopters, or carried around on magic carpets, cannot do two different jobs in two different places at the same time. Second, the fact that well trained and motivated tank crews can undergo a waiting period of several days closed down in their vehicles under NBC threat and emerge fit to fight does not mean that a dozen men packed like sardines into a tin box with all their equipment can do the same. The third notion, less specious but still highly misleading, is that taking an infantry battalion, organized to operate on its feet and steeped in tribal usages appropriate to the way of fighting, and packing it into mobile tin boxes qualifies it to participate in the sophisticated quickstep of the maneuver battle. The tank man halts between moves; the infantryman moves between positions.

There is no doubt that the tendency of modern NATO armies has been to follow the German lead in making mechanized or armored infantry the most purposeful category. In short, infantry whose major purpose was to protect tanks and get them forward in mobile warfare (dismounting only when immediately available dismounted support was essential to the latter) is now also tasked with positional forward defense, often in its own right. In the *Bundeswehr* defensive concept this means that tanks and Marder IFVs conduct a retrograde maneuver battle, falling back onto and through dismounted elements, which are preferably sited on reserve slopes. If ground has to be yielded, the Marders pick up their sections and retire to a new line of dismounted action, covered on their way out by the armor. As Marders can also be deployed in an anti-helicopter role, it would appear that in defensive operations at least the *Bundeswehr* places little emphasis on the direct support of infantrymen.

To some observers, the West Germans and Soviets have clearly "wedded their mechanized infantry to the vehicles they would have liked when they last fought each other" and ignored the fact that the power of the dis-

mounted infantrymen to influence armored operations is "so much increased that the concept which led them to design those Leviathans is outdated."

Simpkin basically argues that mechanized infantry in the in-house role is not really infantry at all, but rather an appendage to the tank corps. In his opinion, the proposal to incorporate into the armored arm those regiments and self-propelled artillery units that had traditionally formed the motor battalions within British armored brigades during World War II (namely, the Royal Green Jackets and Royal Horse Artillery) would have been most appropriate.

He appears convinced that had armored logistic units also been allowed to retain their identity and their links, the resulting concentration of armored expertise might well have led to radical thinking on doctrine and equipment and to a sizable leap in fighting power. He also feels that if in-house infantry were organic to armor as the "assault troops" of British armored reconnaissance units are today, they would be better trained in the armored way of living and fighting; their section commanders, for example, would be more interchangeable with their vehicle commanders. They would also receive special training that, while omitting many irrelevant aspects of infantry training, would include a number of basic field engineering and recovery skills, as well as specialist skills such as the operation and maintenance of sophisticated surveillance systems.

TRADITIONAL LOT

It must not be forgotten, though, that successful defensive operations historically have depended as much on static or positional elements as on dynamic or mobile features. Providing the cover from which firepower is developed has traditionally been the lot of the infantry, which of all arms is deemed best able to hold ground. The whole alertness of an army, in fact, ultimately revolves around the infantryman; by day and night, in fog, rain or snow, it is he who stands on guard and patrols for information and domination. There must, of course, be enough men to provide the sentries (double at night) and the patrols, and to ensure that the great bulk of the infantry does not get too tired from too much sentry and patrol work.

Connected with this, infantry in the defense today faces several formidable problems. According to recently completed Canadian Army wargames, the greatest threat to the infantry is from Soviet artillery, which must be expected to destroy all unprotected troops on identified battle positions — and most of their IFVs if the troops are located with them. To dig-in properly while continuing their patrol and sentry tasks, however, calls for far more troops than most armored infantry organizations currently dispose. (The Marder and the Bradley, though ideally suited for supporting mobile tank forces, dismount only six men each.)

The additional threat of massed enemy armor must

also be viewed in light of engagement ranges: Fire that is opened too soon from main defensive localities risks incurring the destructive wrath of Soviet artillery. Yet, if IFVs are deployed forward in sniping positions they are likely to be subjected to attrition from the direct fire of enemy tanks and attack helicopters. Here again the mobility of infantry could be reduced to that of 1916.

All of this leads to the conclusion that, given appropriate terrain, the use of IFVs in depth as mobile fire support for properly dug-in infantry on reverse slopes might be a more reasonable defensive tactic. In such a case there could be greater need for a general purpose — as opposed to a strictly anti-IFV — main armament that has a high explosive, screening smoke, and illuminating capability in addition to HEAT (high explosive antitank) variations. This, naturally, begs the question of whether the cannon requirement should be separated from the troop lift requirement.

If there were such a vehicle, though, the IFVs could be employed under centralized control as direct fire support weapon systems in their own right, while APCs without cannon could remain in "hide" positions close enough to move up quickly and redeploy the dismounted infantry but far enough away to avoid destruction by artillery fire. Obviously, standard infantry battalions with larger dismountable sections and with soldiers better trained in traditional infantry skills would likely prove more battle effective in such circumstances than armored infantry battalions. (Even Rommel's infantry had to learn this lesson



outside Tobruk in 1941.) Standard battalions would also be more capable of defending urban and forested areas in both forward and rear combat zones. Armored infantry battalions, in contrast, are not as well-suited for such terrain, for in the words of one German general:

My troops sit in vehicles, are trained to fight from vehicles, and their weapons are specially suited to fighting a mobile enemy in open country. I don't have the manpower, the training, the equipment for city fighting.

The matter of whether hostilities in Central Europe would be characterized by highly mobile, long-range engagements has already been disputed. The surface features and terrain structures of the Federal Republic of Germany are roughly 30 percent wooded, 50 percent agricultural fields, and 10 percent built-up areas and traffic infrastructures. The Soviets themselves estimate that only 50 percent of West Germany is passable to tanks. Target sighting estimates that are also accepted by the Soviets indicate that in antitank engagements, 60 percent of the targets are likely to be acquired at less than one kilometer; however, intervisibility to 2,000 meters and beyond is not expected to decrease below 30 percent.

The foregoing statistics, nonetheless, tend to reinforce General Kroesen's contention that on the drizzly Central Europe front:

We cannot hit what we cannot see and the 14 hours of darkness in mid-winter, snow, rain and the many days throughout the year when fog lasts until noon or even all day are limitations that today's weaponry cannot readily overcome. The same is true of our opponent's weapons. Those realities and the availability of tactical smoke-generating devices in abundance lead me to believe that the next war will be won or lost at the 300-meter range just as in the past.

It is perhaps for such reasons that Major General E. W. von Mellenthin continues to insist that "the Russian infantryman is still one of the most important military factors in the World."

If one adheres to NATO definitions, there is really no classification difference between standard, or line, infantry and light infantry. The advent of the helicopter, furthermore, may now allow both line and airborne infantry to fulfill the role of mountain troops in all but their most specialized aspects. (The *Bundeswehr*, incidentally, fields only one mountain brigade, which, along with one *panzer* and one *panzergrenadier* brigade, constitutes the 1st Mountain Division; the Soviets field no mountain troops per se but do train in mountain warfare.)

The 40 percent of West Germany that is wooded and populated, of course, should not be used as a reason for spawning numerous additional varieties of terrain-dependent infantry. One highly trained and aggressive type of infantry that can fight in both built-up areas and forests and engage tanks at close quarters should surely suffice. These neglected areas of combat, the direct consequence of the mechanized infantry interregnum, would then regain their preeminence along with such other time-honored infantry pursuits as patrolling, sniping, stalking

by stealth, and fighting at night. There would also be a greater requirement for more sophisticated demolition training and for operating more intimately with the assault engineers, all the while still being able to work effectively with supporting armor.

Infantry trained in this fashion would have no problem in carrying out the ambush, tank hunting, and raiding tasks associated with the "guerrilla-zone" or "net" operations proposed, respectively, by F.O. Miksche and Brigadier Simpkin. They would also fall into the category of Canby's "classic light infantryman" operating in "the mixed open and close terrain of West Germany" as "an adjunct element to complement and supplement the combined arms tank team."

While a blurred distinction between line and light infantry is perhaps fortunate for those armies that cannot afford more than one type, the difference between this category and mechanized or armored infantry must be better appreciated. The term "mechanized" appears to be the greatest cause of confusion, because it fails to relate clearly to the tactical requirement to fix or hold, on the one hand, and to hit on the other. Much cloudiness of thought in this regard might be largely dispelled, however, by merely recalling General George S. Patton's counsel that in an infantry formation — best suited for fighting through or holding ground — the purpose of tanks is to support the infantry. Conversely, in an armored formation — best suited for delivering lightning blows — the function of the infantry is to break the tanks loose. Again, line infantry trained in light infantry skills would be most useful to the former, and in-house infantry trained in armored support skills to the latter.

It is somewhat ironic, of course, that traditional light infantry, rifle, and *jaeger* units of both the British and the German armies were among the first armored infantry troops, which today constitute the heaviest of infantry. The lesson here may be that light infantry has historically been more connected with progressive military developments than with any one weapon, machine, type of terrain, or even tactic. Above all, it has invariably been associated with imaginative offensive action in the clash of arms.

A further irony of the current discussion on infantry employment in general is that armies have essentially passed this way before. In 1934 in a book entitled *The Infantry Experiment*, British General H. Rowan-Robinson wrote that "the future of infantry is one of those puzzles of the age which are the undigested fruit of the quick advance of science." Like some of our contemporary writers today, he went on to argue pejoratively that the "fiction that infantry is still the Queen of Battle is of continental concoction and receives some of its substance from the republican politician who much prefers a large army of short-service conscripts — chiefly foot soldiers — to a small professional standing army that might, like the Praetorian Guards, dominate the State." Voicing an "advanced military opinion," he concluded that "Infantry in its existing form has no great scope in continen-

tal warfare of the more advanced type."

Yet, as we now know all too well, the Western Allies in World War II all experienced critical shortages of foot slogging infantry reinforcements. The British, surprised by the North African theater's "rates of wastage" and faced with an acute shortage of infantry, eventually were forced to break up two divisions, though this measure solved only part of the problem.

By the first weeks of 1944, the U.S. Army's shortage of infantry replacements also reached crisis proportions. General Patton's Third Army replacement requirement for that year reached 9,000, the average rifle company being at only 55 percent of its authorized strength. In the Canadian Army, casualties in the infantry were much higher than had been calculated; by August 1944 the average deficiency in 15 battalions in the First Canadian Army ran to 120 all ranks. In effect, each battalion was more than a company short. On the eve of the Gothic Line battles in Italy, moreover, one light antiaircraft unit and an armored reconnaissance regiment were converted to infantry within the 5th Canadian Armored Division.

Though the Canadians, volunteers all, resorted to a remustering policy to produce more infantrymen, the situation eventually became so serious that it precipitated a political crisis within Canada itself. Paradoxically, in the opinion of General Ferdinand van Senger und Etterlin, the German defender of Cassino, although the numbers of infantry had steadily declined relative to the numbers of other fighting troops, the infantry remained more firmly established as queen of the battlefield.

An almost superstitious belief in the all-conquering powers of technology may indeed have caused the Western powers in World War II to grossly underestimate the role of the fighting man on foot. But given that war continues to be a primitive endeavor in which there is always a "friction" that militates against complexity, it is highly likely that the traditional infantry fighting skills applied with cunning and flexibility will still be applicable in the next one. In fact, we might do well to heed Shelford Bidwell's caution:

The more complex the weapon system the greater the mathematical probability, therefore, of wrecking it, not by using a super counter-weapon, but by reverting to the use of a few skilled raiders armed with nothing but rifle, grenade, and explosive charge.

Chances are these would be light infantrymen.



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