

PROFESSIONAL FORUM



Thinking Light

CAPTAIN THOMAS E. FISH

A great deal has been written about the Army's light infantry divisions, but what is being "light" all about? What makes the real difference?

On the surface, it seems that the main distinguishing characteristic is the division's austere MTOE, which allows it to deploy in a relatively few aircraft sorties. But while it does have less equipment, the MTOE is not the main factor. Looking closer, for example, the tactics the division employs also differ from those of other infantry units.

But doctrine and tactics are not the bone deep characteristics that set light fighters apart; nor is it the range of missions they are expected to be prepared to execute. None of these things seem to be the quintessential element that makes the light infantryman a different kind of soldier. Yet, anyone who has witnessed the birth of the modern light infantry can tell you that the light fighter *is* fundamentally different.

I spent almost two years as a rifle platoon leader in the first of these divisions, arriving in May 1984 just as the old 7th Division was beginning its transformation into the 7th Infantry Division (Light). Back then, a lieutenant could seldom go to the field without a senior officer tagging along and taking notes. These officers handed down doctrine and tactics to the small unit leaders and watched to

see what worked and what didn't. Often the "light leaders" made up their own tactics and techniques. It was not uncommon to hear junior officers and NCOs in lively discussions with higher ranking officers about what light infantry units should do and how they should do it.

SUBSTANCE

I have since mulled over those debates, looked at the lessons learned during many field problems, and talked with many officers, NCOs, and privates. The insight I have gained in the process is this: Despite the austere MTOE and the shiny new doctrine and techniques, and despite all the "whiz bang" attention surrounding the word "light," what makes the light infantry different extends much deeper—into the very heart of the individual soldier and his leader. Certainly the MTOE is the structure and the doctrine is the form, but structure and form are nothing without substance, and the substance is the dynamic of "thinking light."

Thinking light is a process that begins with reevaluating most of what an individual previously learned about tactics, especially if the new light fighter is a second lieutenant fresh out of

IOBC. Basic soldier skills and basic patrolling techniques remain extremely valuable, but the rest can be set aside. The "light" thinker must undergo a transformation in his spatial orientation, in his leadership orientation, and in his physical and spiritual orientation. Some people will change more than others, but everybody will change to some degree.

The first step in the process is for the light fighter to discard all linear perceptions of the battlefield. He must forget such things as friendly lines and enemy lines and FEBAs. No matter where he may find himself, the conventional battlefield will have little application to him. He must learn to think instead in terms of expanding and contracting circles. Except for the local security afforded by mutually supporting fires covering 360 degrees around him, there will be no secure areas. This includes the trains areas of brigades and divisions, because there are no rear areas.

The second step in "thinking light" is for him to acquire a new feeling about formations. Although the basic building block is still the fire team, formation sizes are smaller. A platoon, the basic formation in "regular" infantry, often works as independent squads. Company columns are rare. Formations of battalion size or larger come together for the attack and then dis-

perse. Whether the mission calls for searching out elusive guerrillas or slipping through heavily fortified positions, smaller formations are the norm, because they provide for broader coverage of terrain as well as better protection from the lethality of modern weapons. (This increased decentralization, however, brings with it more command and control problems, and these can be overcome only through strong leadership at squad level and a clear understanding of the commander's intent.)

In both low- and mid-intensity conflicts, even defensive formations are tailored to be *offensive* in nature. The light fighter's art is to use smaller groups to confuse and weaken the enemy, hitting him from several different directions when he least expects it, much like a spider laying a web for unsuspecting insects. Through the dynamic of "thinking light," less is turned into more as the light fighter becomes that spider—light, silent, and deadly.

The light infantryman's orientation toward terrain is also different. Where the mechanized infantry soldier looks at the ground from a broad perspective, and with a more linear orientation, the light fighter learns to appreciate the nooks and crannies. Each piece of turf is considered in developing operational plans and the ground itself, with its ridges and folds, becomes a close ally. "Thinking light" allows the light fighter to use the earth in unexpected ways and teaches him to master the most difficult terrain. His home is in the unpleasant places—the rocks, swamps, and jungles. He learns to turn adversity into advantage.

Because he is given less but is expected to do more, the light leader must develop a different leadership orientation. This new orientation is reflected in the way he trains himself and his soldiers, in the way he gives commands and controls the battle, and in the way he solves problems. The various enemies he is likely to be deployed against, and the environments he is likely to be deployed in, calls for a training program that stresses the fundamentals of marksmanship, field-



What makes the light infantry different extends into the very heart of the individual soldier and his leader.

craft, land navigation, basic tactics, and physical fitness. He avoids rigid drills and elaborate techniques that may reduce his flexibility. In addition, he and his soldiers must become competent forward observers, combat engineers, and medics, because these are tasks they will often have to perform for themselves on the battlefield.

Decentralization is the key to many light infantry operations. Well trained subordinate leaders who understand their commander's intent and who are capable of independent action are essential. Therefore, the light platoon leader must spend a great deal of time with his squad leaders to make sure that they understand the way he thinks and that he understands them as well. The squad leader, more than the platoon leader, is the leadership focus in light infantry operations. The platoon leader must be careful to give clear mission-type orders and then to allow his squad leaders the flexibility they need. The

same is true for the relationship between the company commander and his platoon leaders.

Leaders make decisions, solve problems, and set the example. "Thinking light" teaches the light leader to become a master of the indirect approach, to accomplish the mission while at the same time making the most efficient use of his resources. Time, food, water, ammunition, and soldiers will be too scarce to be thrown at an objective or a problem in the time-honored straight-on fashion. The light infantry soldier or leader cannot afford to be tied to routine solutions, because functional rigidity would be his undoing in combat. He must develop a broader field of vision and learn to use whatever is available.

Finally, at the heart of "thinking light" is the physical and spiritual dimension in which body, mind, and spirit are honed so that each soldier himself becomes a weapon—the

embodiment of soldier power. This is by far the most difficult element of the dynamic to achieve, but there are several ways in which it takes root.

It begins with a group of men who know each other, who will stay together, and who will draw strength from each other. (COHORT is an essential part of a light infantry force.) Then these men are put into a strenuous physical fitness program, including foot marches and combatives. Next, they are presented a series of challenges to be met both individually and in small groups—mountain climbing, rappelling, river rafting, obstacle and orientation courses, long range patrols, and survival situations.

Once their bodies are hard and their confidence in themselves and each other is high, their leader begins to train their minds. This requires a working education program that includes the Basic Skills Education Program

(BSEP), General Test (GT) score improvements, college courses, and leader-taught classes on military and non-military subjects. The smarter the soldier gets, the more he becomes a weapon, and a weapon that can wield itself.

The final element in the dynamic of thinking light, and in the process of building a light infantry force, is spiritual battleproofing. In this the battalion chaplain plays a key role. A soldier who is spiritually in tune is less likely to become a stress casualty. The U.S. fighting man has had a long history of valor and dedication, but the light infantryman of today must develop the same hardened body, keen mind, and resolute spirit found in the consummate martial artist.

The light infantry divisions are not "elite" units. Their size and the variety of the missions they will be called on to do prohibit them that status. But they

are different, and what makes them different is not just the MTOE or the tenets and tactics developed for their use. The difference is that, faced with the requirement to do more with less, the soldier in a light division learns to *think* "light." His special orientation and the way he looks at the battlefield are different. The increased use of decentralization and the scarcity of resources cause him to lead and to solve problems differently. And most importantly, the light infantryman himself becomes a weapon through disciplining his body, his mind, and his spirit. In essence he becomes like a spider—light, silent, and deadly.

Captain Thomas E. Fish served with the 7th Infantry Division as a rifle platoon leader and a battalion adjutant. He recently completed the Infantry Officer Advanced Course and is now assigned to the 3d Armored Division. He is a 1983 graduate of the United States Military Academy.

The "Jet"

A Streamlined Movement Formation

CAPTAIN NOYES B. LIVINGSTON III

Mounted and dismounted movement for many units seems to be more difficult than it should be. Just as we use certain drills to allow crews and units to act in the absence of orders, we can also use simple unit formations to facilitate movement.

Some leaders are opposed to prescribed formations, because they view them as inflexible and dogmatic. Actually, though, a well rehearsed and familiar movement formation allows leaders to be more aware of the situation and more flexible in their response to it, because they are not wrapped up

in the mechanics of moving.

There is no good substitute for the proven staggered column for tactical road marches, but there is an elegant formation that is suitable for all cross country traveling, traveling overwatch, and bounding overwatch techniques. It is called the "Jet" formation because seen from above it looks like a high-speed jet aircraft (Figure 1). The Jet formation is nothing more than the traveling overwatch formation shown in Figure 4-19, FM 7-7, but with the left rear APC moved back abreast of the one on the right.

The Jet formation allows a unit to change from the traveling formation to traveling overwatch to bounding overwatch without altering the basic formation, just the distance between the elements. The Jet provides good observation and fire to the front, flanks, and rear and, unlike wingman pairs or sections, it also makes contact with the smallest element—the point or lead element.

The formation also allows the point element to concentrate on land navigation, route selection, and forward security. This permits the control element to