

INFANTRY LETTERS



LIGHT TO MECH

Captain Thomas E. Fish, in his article "The Infantry Spectrum: Crossing from Light to Mech" (January-February 1990, pages 39-41), is right on target in his discussion of the transition from the world of light infantry to the world of heavy.

My own experience tracks perfectly with his. After six years of airborne and Special Forces assignments, I was assigned as an armored cavalry troop commander in Germany. As with Captain Fish, I did not have the luxury of a "break-in" period, or of an assignment such as assistant S-3. I would therefore like to reinforce his excellent points with a few of my own:

First, beware of the trap of dragging along the esprit and traditions of your previous unit. Although your service in that unit should be a source of personal pride, your first loyalty must be to the troops of your new unit. I'm not saying you should hide your past associations. But if your soldiers perceive that they are not your "first love," you will lose credibility with them and with that will go their loyalty to you. Remember that loyalty goes down the chain of command as well as up, and that ours is a big Army with proud units full of great traditions.

Second, if at all possible, attend the Motor Officers Course at Fort Knox. It concentrates on "hands-on" in the strictest sense. Not only will it greatly improve your technical proficiency, it will also reinforce your self-confidence as you step into your mechanized infantry motor pool for the first time.

Finally, instead of trying to remain in a light unit, seek a mechanized infantry assignment. (When I was an airborne battalion commander, I was often asked for career advice by officers leaving the battalion for an officer advanced course. Mostly, they wanted me to help get them

round-trip tickets.)

Heavy-light and light-heavy operations are on the schedule at the Combat Training Centers, and they were habitually used in Panama on Operation JUST CAUSE. The amalgamation of those units presents a significant challenge, and officers who have served in both light and heavy units—and who thoroughly understand the strengths and weaknesses of each—are particularly adept at leading such mixed forces. My armored cavalry experience, which I saw as the death-knell to my career at the time, proved absolutely invaluable years later when I conducted combined arms training with light-heavy forces.

Regardless of the current perception among many lieutenants and captains as to the negative career effect of "crossing from light to mech," I encourage them to do just that—and from mech to light as well.

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NOSTALGIA TIME

I thoroughly enjoyed Colonel Hillman's observations concerning the Army uniform in the decade before World War II ("The 8th Infantry Detraining," by Colonel Rolfe L. Hillman, Jr., INFANTRY, January-February 1990, pages 32-36).

Certainly that uniform was neither practical nor appealing. But I was amazed that, despite their skimpy earnings, so many soldiers found ways to improve on the Government issue—the three pleats on the back of the O.D. shirt that gave it a tighter more form-fitting appearance; the tailoring of the breeches to reduce their bagginess; the leggings wrapped in a precisely molded fashion; and finally

the reblocked, flattened campaign hat.

To me, the 8th Infantry soldiers depicted in the article, with their rifles loosely slung and their hats set at a jaunty angle and appearing not to have a care in the world beyond the next chow line, personify the seasoned "regular" infantryman as I knew him in that now dimly distant period.

The pictures in the article attracted me for another reason. In 1935, while a member of the 29th Infantry at Fort Benning, I was detailed to give the soldiers of the 8th Infantry Regiment's weapons platoon their annual proficiency test. The platoon, consisting of a 3-inch Stokes mortar section and a 37mm gun section, was part of the regimental headquarters company and was usually staffed by personnel with multitudinous duties, which allowed them scant time for training. The test—which involved the occupation of firing positions, the execution of defensive fires, forward displacement, and the execution of fires on targets of opportunity—was a difficult one, and I did not expect noteworthy results. My expectations were further reduced when the platoon leader reported to me for instructions. He was a slightly built, grey-haired, soft-spoken master sergeant who looked more like a paper pusher than a field soldier.

Was I ever surprised! The only criticism I could make was the failure of a mortar crewman to don heat-protective gloves before evacuating a misfired round from the tube. Aside from gaining a healthy respect for those 8th Infantry "regulars," I also was reminded of a maxim (honored more in the breach than in the observance) that one should never pre-judge performance by initial offhand impressions.

Colonel Hillman's discourse on the mini-railroad also jogged my memory. No one who ever served at Fort Benning in those years will ever forget it. After

a full day in the field, the train ride back to the post was a real morale builder. There were several uphill stretches where, as the train slowed down, everyone would pile off and run alongside until the locomotive was over the hump, then pile back on amidst cheers as the engineer tooted his thanks.

The train also affected me in a different way. In 1933, I was detailed to assist in the investigation of a very large discrepancy—amounting to several hundred thousand dollars, as I recall—in the account of the post quartermaster. The process was quite tedious.

First, an office check was made of all receipts and disbursements for a particular item for the previous year. The resulting tally was then checked in the warehouse. After checking hundreds of items, we could find nothing wrong. If the office record showed 63 shovels on hand, that was exactly what we found in the bin. On one occasion, the tally showed 10,001 blankets, but my warehouse check showed only 10,000, all in bales. Elated that at last I had found a discrepancy, I confronted the warehouseman—a grizzled, elderly QM sergeant—with my find. But my elation was short lived. With that slightly sardonic, paternal look reserved by senior sergeants for uppity young second lieutenants, he produced from a locker a single blanket clearly marked "Inspected and Condemned."

Finally, much to everyone's relief, one enterprising cohort found that a branch of the Chattahoochee Choo Choo had been abandoned, but the value of the rails had never been dropped from the inventory.

And this evokes another maxim: If you've got a big problem, look first for a big solution.

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MISLED

I read with interest the March-April 1989 issue of *INFANTRY*, especially the article "The Seig River Incident," by Major Thomas H. Jones (pages 29-33).

As I scanned the article, noticing the pictures of the patrols from World War II and reading the editor's introductory comments—specifically, "most important was the patrol leader's apparent inability or unwillingness to make sound and timely decisions"—I expected an article about tactics, such as those in Ranger School.

Imagine my surprise when I read the article about a young man's refusal to kill a prisoner. Therefore, the introduction was even more troubling. What would you suggest as a "sound and timely decision"?

Perhaps, instead of implying that the young man's decision was unsound, you might have highlighted in your comments the importance and consequences of the values we hold. We condemned the Germans for their brutality during the war, and certainly this young private first class made a high-risk choice on the basis of ingrained boyhood training. He couldn't know the answers to many of the ethical dilemmas posed by Major Jones, but he did know one thing: To kill a prisoner under those circumstances was wrong. He could have gone to jail, or worse.

As it turned out, the German soldier was found where the Americans had left him, and they, in turn, were taken prisoner. We know they lost their freedom. We don't know from the article whether they died in captivity. Quite a choice for a kid to make!

You might have brought that out.

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AUTHOR'S DEFENSE

When I wrote the article "Map Course Distances" (*INFANTRY*, July-August 1989, pages 12-15), I was concerned that the technical nature of the article would put readers off. I worked hard to make it as light and easy to read as possible, given the nature of the material. Apparently, judging from the comments of Lieutenant Patrick J. Conlon (November-December 1989, page 3) and Major Russell A. Gallagher (January-February

1990, page 4), I failed in that mission.

Unfortunately, it appears that most of their criticism was directed at what they *thought* I wrote rather than what I actually wrote.

At no point in the article did I suggest that this method be taught to junior soldiers. On the contrary, teaching them this method would be worse than useless; it would only confuse and frighten them, and we have enough of that already.

The method is for use when exact and precise distances must be determined, and that is made clear throughout the article. Obviously, there is no need for this kind of accuracy if a unit is navigating from one terrain feature to another. But if absolute precision is required, I believe the method I described fulfills that requirement better than any other.

Both the lieutenant and the major suggested the "simpler" method of using a piece of paper and the scales on the map to determine distance. This method is indeed simpler. I learned it first in basic and advanced individual training and have used it many times over the intervening 22 years—and still do for "quick and dirty" solutions. But it is *not* more accurate, as the lieutenant suggests. There are at least six possible errors using this method. Additionally, a standard Government-issue .5mm mechanical lead pencil has a built-in error of 25 meters for each point it marks on a 1:50,000 map, or at least 50 meters for two points. Good enough for "quick and dirty" but not nearly good enough for setting up a map course.

A key factor in teaching land navigation is developing the students' confidence in themselves and their equipment. To do that, you start small, giving them some easy successes. Then you build on these successes by going to more and more difficult land navigation problems until they find themselves navigating successfully over longer distances and more difficult terrain, almost without realizing how much their skill has progressed.

In the early stages, poor instruction, antiquated equipment, and poor courses can destroy that budding self-confidence in a new student. (Try to remember the first time you were on a compass course.

After carefully counting each of your footsteps and trying to stay precisely on the ½-degree of the required azimuth, you looked up from your compass and saw nothing but trees, and they all looked exactly alike. Did you feel the stirrings of panic, uncertainty, self-doubt because you couldn't see the marker? Or did you feel elation—"I did it! This isn't so tough!"—when you came out close to the marker? If so, try to identify with that new map reading student.)

The intent of the article was not to replace existing methods but to supplement them—to assist those who lay out the course (not those going through it) in determining the exact distance between points, thus reducing one more factor that can destroy a new student's self-confidence.

I think there is a lot wrong with the way we teach land navigation in our service schools. For one thing, we teach people they must pass our land navigation courses. For this, they learn, contrary to Lieutenant Conlon's assertion and common sense, that they usually must navigate to within five feet of a fencepost or marker (usually hidden, it seems, in the middle of a bush) and then find it. If they don't find enough markers, they flunk the course. Yet in the real world, as both Lieutenant Conlon and Major Gallagher imply, we don't navigate that accurately; we navigate to terrain features.

I have survived the school environment many times, and I have also competed in orienteering on an international level and navigated in the field under a variety of unpleasant circumstances. And, as we all have, I have spent time looking for markers that were not where I knew they should be.

I have also developed map courses and methods for students, trying to incorporate some of what I have learned the hard way. The article was one attempt to share some of that knowledge. Others who read the article and try the method will have to judge my success or failure.

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SOMETHING MISSING

Having spent 20 years in Special Forces, airborne infantry, and long range surveillance units, I read with only passing interest the Commandant's Note on the new Bradley platoon organization in the January-February 1990 issue of *INFANTRY* (pages 1-2).

I was favorably impressed, however, with the efforts to adapt the structure and tactics of small mechanized infantry units to more effectively complement their principal fighting system, the M2 Bradley. The rifle platoon's manpower has been restructured to provide both for the local security of the vehicle and for a dismounted force that is capable of applying effective fire and maneuver.

The new structure also offers dedicated vehicle commanders, who are most able to employ the vehicles' substantial firepower. The whole concept indicates a pleasing ability to embrace a different organizational concept, something we have not always been able to do in the past.

But something did seem to be missing. I began to recall a popular science fiction movie, *Aliens* (please bear with me). The lieutenant commanding a platoon of "Colonial Marines" attempted to control (not command or lead) his platoon by audio-video link from the security of the unit's armored ground transporter (an APC of sorts). The platoon's two teams (squads) would dismount to do the grunt work while he shouted instructions over their helmet-mounted radios. Much to the ultimate sorrow of the dismount element, this did not prove to be an effective command, control, and communication system.

Although Hollywood has never demonstrated much in the way of tactical proficiency, the scriptwriter did have one point right. The dismount element had a single leader, the platoon sergeant, on the ground to directly control the two squads.

It appears to me that this is what is lacking in the new Bradley platoon organization. Who commands the two dismounted squads? The platoon leader is more than occupied with fighting his own vehicle—watching his wing vehicle, navigating, searching for targets, and direct-

ing the B section—to control two dismounted squads effectively. Additionally, the squads will not always be within sight of the Bradleys, especially in urban or wooded terrain, or even in dense brush.

The organization ignores the principle of unity of command. There needs to be a single leader on the ground to command the two fire and maneuver elements, and he should not be one of the squad leaders. They will have their hands more than full.

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WORLD WAR I ENCYCLOPEDIA

The Garland Publishing Company is looking for essays of 500 to 5,000 words on various aspects of infantry actions, weapons, equipment, and personnel during World War I to be included in a volume of *Encyclopedia of American Wars*.

Anyone who wishes to contribute is invited to write to me at 14509 Triple Crown Place, Darnestown, MD 20878.

DR. ANNE C. VENZON

MILITARY HISTORY SYMPOSIUM

The Department of History at the U.S. Air Force Academy will sponsor the Fourteenth Military History Symposium 17-19 October 1990. The theme is "Vietnam, 1964-1973: An American Dilemma."

For more information, anyone who is interested may write me at Department of History, U.S. Air Force Academy, USAF Academy, CO 80840-5701, or call me at AUTOVON 259-3230, commercial (719) 472-3230.

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