

PROFESSIONAL FORUM



Infantry's Top Gun

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The United States Army has come a long way from those dark days in the early 1970s just before it pulled its units out of Vietnam. The recent operation in Panama certainly showed the world the Army is back on track. A major factor that has contributed to this improved combat readiness has been the stabilization of infantry brigade and battalion command tours. It is time for the Army to do the same for the key combat player—the infantry company commander—and start treating him like the most important commander in the chain of command, which he is.

The British Army has long recognized the importance of having a true professional as the skipper of every one of its infantry companies, an officer who knows his trade inside and out and who can train and fight his company with great skill and precision.

From Waterloo until today, the British Army has consistently fielded superior regular infantry units at the cutting edge. For a recent example, take a look at the 1982 Falklands campaign. British Army and Marine units assembled their people from all over the world in the blink of an eye, and set sail on a scratch

fleet right out of McHale's Navy.

Arriving in the Falkland Islands, they launched a coordinated attack against an entrenched, numerically stronger force that had good fire support backed up by hardhitting and effective tactical air support. Amazingly, they did all of this in freezing weather, over rugged unfamiliar terrain, and on a floating logistical shoestring. The British "Queen of Battle" won against odds that a Las Vegas gambler wouldn't have touched with a ten-foot pole.

PROFILE

In examining British infantry history to find the secret to their success, I found that the single factor that has made their infantry so consistently combat effective was the company commander. A profile of an average British infantry company commander in the Falklands War, for instance, would look like this:

He was a 35-year-old major with 15 years of service and a lot of company level troop experience under his belt. He had served in infantry assignments in hot places like Northern Ireland and cold

places like West Germany, and he had trained in some lukewarm places like Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Additionally, he had completed a number of command and staff courses and had probably served on battalion and brigade staffs. In sum, he had the background and experience to train, lead, and fight a company of infantry and to do the kind of job it did so well under the most adverse conditions.

He probably didn't have a university degree, but he did have a degree in *infantry*. His wide experience had taught him that great armies are composed of well trained infantry squads and platoons. He had learned, too, that his job was to forge his squads and platoons into hardened steel. His realistic pre-Falklands unit training program followed the time-tested rule that the more sweat on the training field with heavy concentration on the basics, the less blood on the battlefield.

A British infantry officer may get two shots at a company command: one two-year tour as a senior captain and another two-year tour as a major. On the other hand, his 1990 U.S. counterpart normally gets only one go as a com-

pany commander for an average of 18 months.

Before the Vietnam War, many infantry company commanders in the U.S. Army had the same kind of command experience found in today's British Army, and on a one-on-one basis our units were just as good. For example, in my 8th Infantry Division unit in 1961, the average company commander was on his fourth command tour and had a total of about 15 years of service with troops. These skippers knew their stuff because they had learned it the best way: by doing it and then doing it again until they got it right. Most never worried about ticket punches and only wanted to stick with their units.

Because these veteran commanders had had the freedom to fail way back on their first command tours, they had learned from making mistakes. The policy then was not immediate excellence or you're out. Accordingly, they learned the art of company command without worrying that they weren't doing the job. As they matured and learned, they were better able to pass their knowledge on to their subordinate leaders and their soldiers. This freedom also developed their confidence and produced commanders who were risk takers, and this is the most important factor in winning in combat.

These professional commanders—many of whom had fought in World War II, the Korean War, or both—knew that their soldiers were their most valuable assets. They, like their British counterparts today, knew that battles were fought and won by well trained, well led squads and platoons. They knew it was their sacred obligation to train their individual soldiers to the highest state of combat readiness, for those men would be at the leading edge taking the highest risks and paying the ultimate price in any future war.

By the mid-1960s, for a number of reasons, the Army had lost its great pool of seasoned company commanders. Their successors were too inexperienced to keep it all together. They did not have the training or the experienced NCOs they so badly needed to help them command frequently unwilling and openly rebellious companies of draftees. To

further complicate their problems, their units normally operated as independent forces on a decentralized counterinsurgency battlefield against a battle-scarred, professionally led foe who held the initiative. At the maneuver level, they were the wrong skippers to have at the helm.

George Patton, one of the U.S. Army's most knowledgeable commanders and greatest trainers, is reputed to have said that an officer is not worth a pinch of salt until he has had a minimum of ten years commanding troops. I agree with his sentiment, but would not put an exact time on how long it takes for a leader to learn what is essential to lead on the battlefield and, who, as George Wilson says in his book *Mud Soldiers*, "... will decide who lives and who dies; who wins and who loses."

Like everything else in the combat business, it depends on the enemy, the terrain, the weather, and the leader concerned. I will say from my experience that the longer an officer stays at company level, the better troop leader he will become, but only if he has had a seasoned, mature skipper to ~~teach him~~ how to lead by his example, guide him through the minefields of infantry command, and hammer the tricks of the trade into his head.

MOST IMPORTANT

I am convinced the most important leader in the Army is the infantry company commander. An infantry company has the most dangerous job and takes the most heat. The primary purpose of the vast U.S. military apparatus is to support the infantry company so it can accomplish its assigned mission. Its commander is faced with tough life-and-death decisions and should be among the most qualified infantry leaders in the Army. He should be a top gun.

Most young infantry leaders that I have spoken with recently want to do just that. Wilson, who spent two years researching his book, sums this frustrating problem up with the comment that "most (infantry officers) would rather stay in the mud and learn their jobs. It's the damn system. Rotate or else."

Like the British, the U.S. Army should make the infantry company commander a major, too, and the company should have a captain as deputy company commander and a senior lieutenant as executive officer. The commander's position should be a single-track career field in itself, and its occupant should stay there for at least three years and then move to another company.

This field grade skipper should be mature, understand soldiers and soldier psychology, and be a great hands-on trainer. He should not be learning at the expense of his troops or be concerned that if he makes a mistake he is out. He should be a total professional and an inspiration to all in his command.

As a major, the company commander will be able to take green platoon leaders with the least amount of experience and the toughest job in the Army—to close with and destroy the enemy—and mold them into tactically and technically competent leaders full of confidence and common sense and a strong desire to take care of their men. He will have the time and the experience to train his NCOs properly so that once again they will be the strong backbone of the Army. And his broad troop leading experience will allow him to train and motivate the first termers and convert them into physically rugged, spirited combat soldiers who will hang tough in combat.

As a major, a company commander will not be that distant in rank from his battalion commander. Consequently, he will have the experience and confidence to defend his point of view. Also, if he is promoted, he should be able to make an easy transition to the higher rank. Not only will he bring great maturity to his position, he will have nothing to prove except to make his unit the best company in the world. In brief, the major will serve his unit with salty professional leadership that will accomplish the mission with fewer casualties. And if he is not promoted, there is no reason why he should not stay as a company commander and keep doing his thing until he retires.

Today, in the U.S. Army, the time between company and battalion command is at least ten years. With future force re-

ductions, that already too-wide gap will become unbridgeable. As the defense dollar is reduced, the importance of putting absolute professionals in command of the Army's infantry companies becomes even more critical. In the future, fewer training and maintenance funds will be available, and the seasoned skipper will be better equipped to jump over this hurdle. His experience will allow him to train his command effectively and inexpensively in the local training areas, while continuing to make the training exciting and adventurous.

Additionally, it appears that, because of restricted funds, by the year 2000 the Active Army's strength will be much less than what it is today. This will create even more difficult challenges for the infantry company commander, because his future missions probably will be focused on medium and low intensity operations. The Army will need the sharpest leadership and the most seasoned and cunning infantry company commanders to successfully fight these multifaceted, highly complicated, decentralized campaigns.

The Army can ensure having that kind of leadership if it will put majors in command of infantry companies. Its soldiers deserve this, because their very lives depend on it.

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Deep Operations

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During the first week of REFORGER 90, the 1st Battalion, 87th Infantry, 10th Mountain Division (Light Infantry) was given the following mission: Conduct a 60-kilometer infiltration through mobile enemy forces, execute disruption operations against enemy combat support and combat service support elements, and, on order, exfiltrate to friendly lines.

Clearly, this was a doctrinally correct mission for a light infantry task force, but was it realistic and could it succeed? And assuming that the light task force could achieve positional advantage deep in the enemy's rear area, would the payoff be worth the high risk of losing the friendly force?

Infiltration operations were nothing new to these light fighters. Like most light infantry battalions, the 1st Battalion, 87th Infantry task force had participated in numerous staff exercises and divisional command post exercises with similar missions. Also, the battalion had had the good fortune to learn at the National Training Center (NTC) the previous summer that the successful execution of

infiltration, followed by attacks in the enemy's rear, is much more difficult to achieve on the ground than on a battleboard. These lessons bolstered the light leaders' confidence, however, and convinced them that deep operations could be even more successful in the strikingly different European environment for several reasons:

First, the foothills of the Bavarian Alps offer more cover and concealment and, unlike the California desert, allow soldiers to forage from the land, particularly for water. Squad movement, the norm in decentralized light operations, is not restricted to the night as it is in the desert. During the winter months in Europe, daylight movement can often be accomplished during the foggy conditions that exist almost every morning and every evening.

Second, when two opposing heavy corps square off, planners seldom pay much attention to the light forces or consider them in combat ratios; the odds in favor of their preservation therefore go up dramatically in the European environ-

ment. By contrast, at the NTC the opposing force (OPFOR) actively pursues light fighters during the reconnaissance and counter-reconnaissance battle and templates their moves during the main battle. The perceived tempo of the battle between the heavy forces in REFORGER 90 made it unlikely that the OPFOR would routinely wargame a light infantry threat in its rear areas.

The third point of promise concerned casualty evacuation, always a problem in deep operations. Light fighters know that their chances of surviving wounds in the desert are dismal if those wounds are sustained during daylight or at night in rugged terrain where evacuation helicopters cannot land. They believe that a clandestine recovery in Europe stands a much better chance of succeeding.

All of these precepts were validated during the first week of REFORGER 90: On the evening of 14 January, the task force began a truck movement to its area of operations in T1 (see map). It was to bury itself there while an armored cavalry squadron conducted covering force