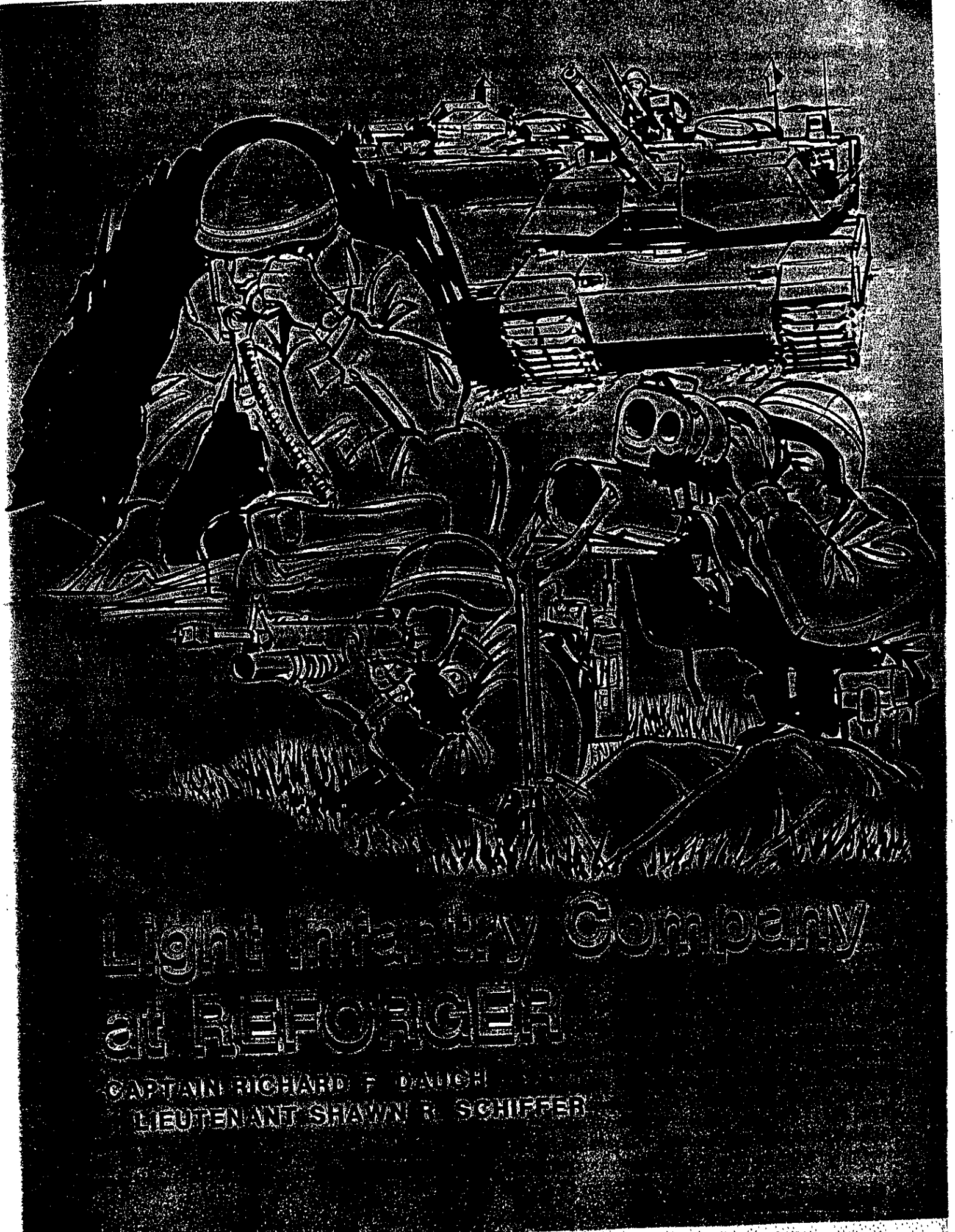

Light Infantry Company at FORGER

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The most recent REFORGER exercise—REFORGER 1990 (Exercise CENTURION SHIELD)—was marked by a number of significant changes from previous REFORGER exercises. In addition to increased computer battle simulation and a scaled-down heavy force, more than 3,000 light fighters from the 10th Mountain Division were deployed into the simulated high intensity conflict.

Although the exercise did not offer its participants at company level a training intensity similar to what they could encounter at the National Training Center, it did give them a unique opportunity to test the effectiveness of light and heavy joint operations in a European scenario.

Our observations here are those of a light infantry company attached to a tank-heavy armor task force during the exercise. They are primarily directed at making light infantry company commanders aware of some of the difficulties of working with heavy units. At the same time, these observations may give mechanized infantry and armor commanders a better understanding of the capabilities and limitations of a light force.

Additionally, we acknowledge in advance that some of the methods and practices mentioned here were specific to the REFORGER 1990 exercise and would not necessarily be used in actual combat.

When our company linked up with the armor battalion to which we would be attached throughout the exercise, we were surprised to find that few of the battalion's officers involved in planning and conducting the operations had any idea of how a light company operated.

While heavy forces fight a more centrally controlled battle that is oriented at company level, light forces operate in a more decentralized manner, usually at squad or platoon level. An armor or mechanized infantry battalion S-3 who finds a light unit attached to his own must understand this significant difference before developing his operational plan. Fortunately, the commander of the armor battalion our company was attached to asked us to tell him how our company could be employed most effectively.

For those who are not familiar with light infantry operations, an excellent starting point is to study the light infantry company tables of organization and equipment, along with such documents as the 1985 white paper on light infantry and Field Manuals 7-70 and 7-71.

A light infantry company operating in a high intensity scenario against armored or mechanized forces has distinct capabilities—and weaknesses as well. For simplicity, these are discussed here in relation to the seven battlefield operating systems outlined in ARTEP 7-10 MTP (Mission Training Plan for the Light Infantry Company):

Maneuver. While a light force cannot hope to keep pace with the speed and fluidity of movement in mechanized operations, its ability to break down and conduct decentralized operations effectively at platoon and squad level makes for a different type of mobility—a wide dispersion of forces striking at the enemy commander to make him feel they are everywhere at once.

Through the employment of antiarmor ambushes and of antiarmor hunter-killer teams on key or restrictive terrain, a light infantry platoon can cover several square kilometers in which armor or mechanized forces are operating. Equipped with the highly effective AN/PRC-126 squad radio, a light infantry squad can operate independently and can request close air support and indirect fire. At the same time, the squad is still under the platoon leader's control and can be consolidated when a target of opportunity presents itself that requires the massing of additional force.

To operate under these conditions, small unit leaders must be aggressive and self-sufficient and show a great deal of initiative. And the soldiers, to withstand the hardship of being at the end of a tenuous resupply line, must be physically fit and well disciplined.

A light infantry platoon and its squads are trained to identify and strike at "soft" targets—command and control centers, enemy tactical operation centers, and trains sites. The units move and conduct offensive operations solely at night and use the daylight hours for sustainment, planning, and acquiring and observing additional targets through numerous listening and observation post positions.

When considering a light force's maneuver capabilities, the commander of a heavy force should keep in mind that the light force obviously cannot cover the same amount of terrain as the heavy force, nor can it be consolidated and moved instantaneously.

Another obvious point, but one that bears repeating, is that a light force should not be used in a head-to-head confrontation with tanks if this can be avoided. Despite the capabilities of the M-47 Dragon, the light force simply cannot carry enough missiles to become involved in any kind of protracted engagement with tanks without risking severe losses.

Our company was able to use the Dragon and the AT-4 effectively in reverse slope and flank positions as covering weapons for antitank mine and obstacle emplacements. But when we went head-to-head with armor and mechanized forces without well constructed obstacles, the results were disastrous.

Fire Support. A light company has two organic 60mm mortars, plus any additional fire support assets the parent unit may give it. Instruction in observed fire techniques is conducted down to the level of the individual soldier; the light squad is therefore able to bring all of its indirect fire assets to bear upon appropriate targets.

In REFORGER, indirect fire was the light forces' single most effective weapon. It allowed us to hit the enemy with enough firepower without having to become engaged in confrontations against vastly superior direct fire weapons. This non-attributable means of engaging the enemy continuously frustrated the opposing force (OPFOR). In fact, our use of indirect fire weapons was so effective that our greatest problem was having too few available umpires to judge the results of the large number of fire missions requested during defensive missions.

During a platoon level zone reconnaissance where elements were spread out over significantly greater distances than they would be in normal operations, however, requesting fire support became a problem because of the range of the squad radios. The platoons countered this problem by using field

expedient antennas and by moving to high ground whenever necessary. (One platoon waited until the hours of darkness and then made its way into a nearby town to use a telephone to identify indirect fire targets to higher headquarters.)

Heavy force commanders should be aware that the indirect fire missions light infantry soldiers request will be only as effective as the weapons supporting them. For example, the light units may call on their smaller mortars more frequently because they are readily available. But they will have less destructive effect on the armored vehicles the heavy commander would probably most like to see destroyed. Different weapon systems will have to be allocated for that purpose. Since soft targets are the favorite prey of light forces, though, mortars should be adequate for most indirect fire requests.

Additionally, fire support officers for heavy units should keep in mind that light forces cannot communicate on the tactical fire direction system (TACFIRE) digital net. The armor battalion we were attached to solved this problem by attaching a fire support vehicle to our company.

Intelligence. A light company commander, unless he has had previous mechanized infantry experience, must be aware that the S-2 portion of the heavy force operations order is radically different from anything he is used to. He must make sure he has as much information as possible about any enemy forces in his area of operations, and should also have overlays that show the location of any friendly heavy force engineer and fire support units in his sector.

Although these considerations may seem obvious, a light commander can easily overlook them, especially if he is somewhat overwhelmed by the scale and distance involved in a heavy force's intelligence considerations. He must work closely with the heavy force's S-2 and scout platoon leader in developing an effective and comprehensive counter-reconnaissance plan, keeping in mind that the light company squads improve the heavy commanders' ability to conduct counter-reconnaissance at night.

In fact, the heavy force S-2 must conduct face-to-face coordination with the light company commander and make a separate intelligence analysis that pertains to the light unit and its unique capabilities and limitations.

Light infantry units get most of their hard intelligence from information collected by their own or the task force's patrols. Apart from a general threat analysis and intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB), our light infantry company at REFORGER 1990 found, identified, and subsequently destroyed its own targets. We were also able to pinpoint for the task force commander a significant number of enemy force locations and to provide him with precise enemy unit identifications that we gathered from vehicle bumper numbers.

Our company also found itself being supplied with detailed and accurate intelligence from many German citizens. During a portion of the exercise in which our company was responsible for the strong point defense of a large urban area, we were repeatedly given updates and even grid locations and sketches of the enemy vehicles and soft targets.

While this type of interrelationship with the local populace represents an effective means of gathering human intelligence, platoon and squad leaders were also made aware that such conversations and observations could compromise their own unit locations and plans. Again, the responsibility for good operations security fell on the small unit leaders, and they responded admirably.

In wartime, information gathered this way would not be used as the sole source of information; it would be used only to corroborate intelligence summaries from higher headquarters.

Mobility and Survivability. One of the strengths of light infantry at the small unit level is its exceptional mobility, which is measured not so much by the distance the force can cover as by the types of terrain and environment in which it can maintain that mobility. Light forces cannot match the speed of the heavy forces, but in urban areas, steep terrain, and thickly vegetated terrain, it can negate the element of speed. In these environments, with the heavy force stymied, or at least made less effective, the light force can roam almost at will.

When the heavy force bypassed such areas as these (after learning the lesson the hard way through either severe losses or good terrain analysis), our company was still able to use the terrain and our superior mobility in certain areas to strike the enemy with direct fire and then withdraw through the restrictive terrain. We were also able to use the cover and concealment provided by that terrain to hide in and call for indirect fire without the enemy being able to find the source of the fire.

In urban terrain, many squads and platoons found themselves situated in private German homes within hours of taking up their assigned defensive positions—thanks to good soldier discipline, leader initiative, and the intercession of German-speaking soldiers. The dry, heated buildings, in addition to facilitating sustainment operations, also virtually eliminated the ever-present helicopter threat.

These squads and platoons reconstituted in shifts during the daylight hours and then patrolled during the hours of darkness, thus concealing the locations of their safehouses. Contingency plans issued to the soldiers also provided for stay-behind operations in case the assigned sector was overrun. Most of the enemy armored forces chose to bypass these areas, no doubt believing that fighting in urban terrain against a force familiar with the area would have been detrimental to their ability to accomplish their missions. As long as we could operate in a decentralized fashion, we could usually hurt the enemy. But whenever we massed for whatever reason, he hurt us badly.

A light company in a high intensity scenario is much more effective when it has engineer support. When obstacles, indirect fire, and direct fire weapons in prepared positions are coordinated, urban and steep, heavily forested terrain become nearly impassable for heavy forces. Accordingly, the ability to channel the enemy into effective engagement areas is significantly better when light forces, with a significant amount of engineer support, are used in an economy of force operation.

For a light infantry company that normally trains for employment in an environment with little or no NBC (nuclear, biological, chemical) threat, the extent of NBC play during REFORGER 1990 was quite a challenge for us. Light commanders who are headed for future REFORGER exercises would do well to devote extra time to NBC training and to operating in chemical protective overgarments at all MOPP (mission oriented protective posture) levels.

Air Defense. With only a Stinger section under the operational control of the entire light infantry battalion, passive measures to avoid detection were the best defense the light infantry company had against both fixed wing and rotary aircraft. Given the large number of heavily armored tank-killing helicopters above the mechanized infantry or armor battlefield, our soldiers had to be schooled in the way scout and attack teams worked together and also in the methods they should use and the proper times to engage. Those aircraft, despite our success in eluding the enemy aircraft at night, were an ever-present menace to our unit.

Combat Service Support. With the one HMMWV (high mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicle) currently allotted to a light infantry company as a support vehicle, and with the extended distances between subordinate elements, sustaining our squads and platoons and performing logistical support operations was difficult. The subordinate elements that were able to secure shelter in private homes or in public buildings such as gymnasiums presented an additional resupply problem.

Our HMMWV was drastically overburdened; the commander had to use it as a command and control vehicle, and the first sergeant or executive officer had to use it for resupply. This problem was severe enough, in our opinion, to warrant a TOE change to add a command and control HMMWV to the light company.

Although the rules of the REFORGER exercise prohibited interfering with Class I resupply, our light infantry soldiers had to use every possible means of sustaining themselves and, in the case of our small unit leaders, their entire elements.

Class I supply of a light company attached to a heavy unit is best carried out if the unit feeds nothing but MREs (meals, ready to eat). Many leaders would argue that denying soldiers A-rations or T-rations is tantamount to abuse, but given a light force's operational methods, the MRE is the better choice, hands down. A light company simply does not have the equipment to heat meals adequately, or the vehicles to pick up meals prepared by the more luxuriously equipped heavy unit and deliver them to its widely dispersed squads. Of greater concern is the tactical risk of assembling even a rifle squad for feeding, in addition to the risk to the first sergeant or executive officer if he has to drive through contested territory in a thin-skinned vehicle.

The MRE is more flexible. Its configuration allows for prepositioning and easy portability. All of our squads said they would have preferred MREs that were warmed with trioxane fuel bars to T-rations that, more often than not, were cold when they arrived at a squad position and usually arrived without the needed accessories—can opener, flatware, and plates. In addition, T-ration trash is much more difficult to dispose of in accordance with a good operations security plan; MRE trash can be carried out in the soldiers' rucksacks.

In keeping with the light infantry doctrinal tenet of using available assets, whenever possible, instead of relying on external resupply, the soldiers augmented the ration cycle by purchasing food on the local economy.

Light infantry doctrine also calls for the extensive use of foraging and other techniques to augment or substitute for resupply. Since foraging would quite obviously have been politically unacceptable during a training exercise, the light force was allowed to test a substitute concept that provided a similar training experience. German currency was issued to officers and senior NCOs who, acting as Class A purchasing agents and field ordering officers, used it to procure subsistence items on the local economy. When Class I resupply was impossible because of the tactical situation, this method worked exceptionally well and was flexible enough to fit within mission constraints.

The resupply of water and facilities for personal hygiene was difficult. While many German citizens allowed our soldiers into their homes for shelter, their generosity understandably waned when it came to allowing nine soldiers to run hot water for shaving or to refill their canteens on a daily basis.

With stringent rules concerning the disposal of human waste in effect throughout the exercise, the problem of where and when soldiers could relieve themselves, especially in urban areas, became one of great concern. Many squad and platoon leaders resolved the situation by paying out of their own pockets in German currency for facilities at local gyms or sports centers.

Class III resupply was made possible through our attachment to an armor battalion that was generous enough to supply our vehicle with diesel fuel and POL (petroleum, oils, and lubricants). When a hose on our vehicle's water pump broke, however, the armor battalion trains did not have the necessary repair part. Again, a local purchase at a German automotive store solved the problem.

Coordination on the ground with the armor battalion's support platoon leader and battalion S-4 resulted in a resupply situation that proved beneficial to our company. (An even more effective supply relationship might have developed if higher level commanders had coordinated with the heavy force before the exercise began; the heavy force leaders told us that they would have been able to ease some of our logistical support problems if they had known more of our requirements.)

Class V resupply of the light force by the heavy force was difficult, because each used different types of ammunition. The heavy force had no 60mm mortar rounds and only limited amounts of 7.62mm rounds for the M60 machinegun and 5.56mm linked ammunition for the M249 SAW. This put an additional burden on the heavy task force's S-4, who had to restructure his logistical packages to supply the light forces. The "push" resupply technique must be used in resupplying the light force.

Command and Control. Command and control was difficult because of the limitations on communication equipment and the lack of a dedicated vehicle for the commander. The rifle squads operated close enough to their platoon for the limited range of their squad radios to be effective. The platoons, however, were often so widely dispersed that communication with the company was either impossible or too sporadic to be effective. As a result, the company commander frequently had to travel out into the areas where the platoons were operating, often surrounded by the enemy, to coordinate with a platoon leader face to face.

The ability of small unit leaders to take the initiative, in keeping with AirLand Battle doctrine, is key to the success of the light force. If the platoon leaders are to capitalize on opportunities, they must first fully understand the general situation and the commander's intent. Then they can make independent decisions within the framework of that intent.

A tactical satellite dish communication system for light infantry forces would be a big help in any type of operation. Because of the additional equipment the radio telephone operator must carry to build field expedient antennas to augment the aging AN/PRC-77 radio, along with the time involved in constructing them, serious consideration should be given to making tactical satellite communications commonplace in light infantry units as well as special operations forces.

An additional HMMWV in the light company would also greatly reduce the burden on the one vehicle currently allotted by TOE. It would also make concurrent command and control and logistical support a real possibility instead of just a concept.

With the political situation constantly changing in Europe, future REFORGER exercises are now in question. Because of both budgetary and environmental constraints, any exercises that may be conducted in the years to come will certainly involve fewer soldiers, more command post play, and more computer simulation.

REFORGER 1990, however, will be remembered not only for the cutbacks that were already evident in it but also by the effectiveness of the light fighters from the 10th Mountain Division who conclusively proved that they can survive and win on the battlefield with a heavy force.

Still, some skeptics have already expressed doubts as to the true effectiveness of the light force in view of the restraints of REFORGER game rules. These disputes might be easily resolved to the benefit of light infantry, mechanized infantry, and armor leaders if light forces were occasionally rotated to the combat training center at Hohenfels, Germany, where the combat environment is more realistic.

To increase the combat readiness and effectiveness of the combined arms team, the leaders of both the light and the heavy forces have an obligation to themselves and their soldiers to study the employment of each other's forces.

The performance of light infantry forces in Exercise CENTURION SHIELD has earned light infantry a spot as a complementary force on the combined arms team in a high intensity conflict.

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