

INFANTRY LETTERS



THE STUDY OF MILITARY HISTORY

Studying military history can be useful to a soldier, but it can also be a pitfall. Some officers study military history in search of the answers to all tactical problems, but what does military history offer that can't be gained more efficiently from other, more specialized sources? The problem lies in the practical application of the principles learned from its study.

Some page through military texts looking for the way soldiers react to stress and fear, for the mistakes that squander lives and materiel, and even to study tactics that have succeeded or failed. They seem to be trying to learn psychology, tactics, management, and history all at the same time. Although these are all fundamental to our profession, this is a poor way to go about studying them. For these other subjects, military history should be the end, not the means. Studying psychology may not be as glamorous as studying the order of battle for a favorite campaign, but if that's what is called for, then we must do it.

I'm not trying to dissuade anyone from studying military history (I'm partial to the U.S. Civil War myself), but soldiers must be aware that authors often have hidden agendas, some of them not even well hidden. Some writers, especially those personally involved with particular battles or campaigns, seem to try to justify the past instead of clarifying it. If an author has put his life on the line in close combat, our right to judge him is shaky at best, but when he loses objectivity, it detracts from the validity of any lessons we might try to draw from his work.

Even an author who is committed to producing a good history is subject to

limitations—his own specialized knowledge, his willingness to demand of himself expertise in several areas, and the willingness of a publisher to print a work of interest to a limited audience. For these reasons, it is difficult to find suitable material for any serious study of military history.

Obviously, there is also a danger in accepting tactics that worked in the past and trying to make them work in the present. Tactics are based on the technology available, and any attempt to base them on history is pure folly. For example, the offensive tactics popular in the Mexican War were based on the use of the smoothbore musket and the bayonet; yet these tactics found their way into the Civil War, despite the fact that the effectiveness of rifled barrels had been well established in the meantime. "Students" of military history on both sides were unwilling to change from the earlier successes of massed rows of troops, and the result was a staggering number of casualties on both sides.

Still, the most dangerous shortcoming in the study of military history can lie with the readers themselves, if they accept an author's word as gospel without checking on his qualifications or rounding out their study with other works. Often, this effort centers on the politics of the readers, many of whom simply don't know real history when they see it. So long as military service is looked upon as a respectable profession, military history—a *man's* history subject to a lack of objectivity from the start—will have a glamorous appeal.

Military history should be regarded as the dessert, to be consumed only after a main course consisting of current doctrine (something we lieutenants are dreadfully short on), psychology, physiology, small-unit tactics, and technical competence. Because of constant

improvements in technology and human understanding, constant review is also required.

In the education of a professional soldier, military history is only one of many ingredients, and it should be treated accordingly.

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BICYCLE INFANTRY IS WORTH CONSIDERING

I wish to commend Captain Kevin D. Stringer for his interesting article "Bicycle Infantry: The Swiss Experience" (INFANTRY, September-October 1994, pages 10-12). He has certainly proposed some ideas that I believe are worth considering.

For skeptics who may deride the example of the Swiss Army's use of bicycles because that army hasn't fought a war lately, there are plenty of modern examples of belligerents using bicycles.

I ran across a very interesting interview conducted with General Hermann Balck, renowned German infantry commander of World Wars I and II, in 1979. The following excerpt deals with the use of bicycles by infantry troops:

From the early '30s, I advocated equipping infantry with bicycles in preference to motorcycles for the reasons that bicycles would be very quiet, would be able to go off the roads onto trails, and would be almost as fast as motorcycles. However, I didn't have the time or the position to fight for this position. I had some actual experience with bicycle infantry because right after the First World War, I commanded a bicycle infantry battalion in Germany.... Bicycle infantry was never very popular with

the troops because, of course, all that pumping was more effort than riding comfortably on a nice, powerful motorcycle. Nevertheless, the mobility of the bicycle troops was quite good. It was absolutely no problem to make a hundred kilometers in a day.

The U.S. Army has also tested bicycles—both in the late 1800s and in this century. In a 1988 REFORGER (return of forces to Germany) Exercise, we used bicycles in a company that had already turned in its M113s and was awaiting its new M2 Bradley fighting vehicles. The company was designated one of our division's air assault elements and in this capacity fulfilled some of the roles proposed by Captain Stringer. As I recall, most of the bicycles were privately owned, with some borrowed from the local morale, welfare, and recreation office.

Unfortunately, when the idea of purchasing a number of bicycles for the division's designated air assault battalion was staffed, it was stopped dead by a G-4 who equated bicycles with old-fashioned low technology. (His sarcastic comment on the returned action was, "This is a new and novel idea! Nonconcur.")

Captain Stringer outlines some convincing arguments for those who remember what Japanese bicycle troops did in Malaya, but there will always be some who oppose such ideas because they don't appear to be "high-speed, high-tech" enough. As an infantryman, I could find a number of uses for bicycles on missions such as he proposes. As a tactical combat force, bicycle infantry would be excellent in combination with an airmobile capability.

Although the use of bicycle infantry naturally depends on the situation, other armies have used them quite successfully in the past, especially in Europe where a highly developed road and trail network supports bicycle trafficability. I do not propose that they be used in contact with conventional enemy forces, but they provide some interesting options in operations other than war, in rear areas, and for the tactical or administrative movement of forces when out of contact.

Just because it's not high-tech doesn't mean it's not a good idea for the U.S. Army.

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AIRDROP OF ALL-TERRAIN BICYCLES

I read Captain Kevin D. Stringer's article "Bicycle Infantry: The Swiss Experience" (INFANTRY, September-October 1994, pages 10-12) with great interest.

In addition to the defensive tasks he outlines, members of my National Guard unit (Lieutenant Jeff Johnson, Staff Sergeant Ernest Hoppe, and I) have militarized folding all-terrain bicycles (ATBs) to act as light strike or reconnaissance vehicles for *offensive* missions.

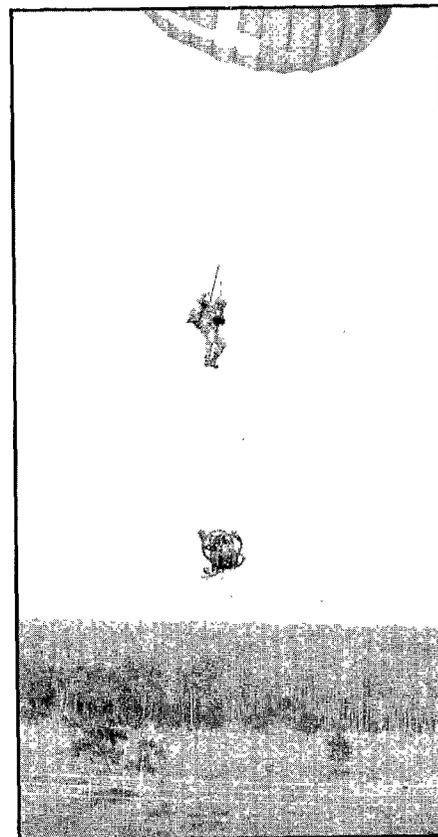
We jumped ATBs from a high-performance STOL (short takeoff and landing) turboprop aircraft during a Special Forces combat developments demonstration. Our combat equipment jumps included M16A2 assault rifles in M1950 cases, mesh-panel tactical load-bearing vest with ammunition, MREs (meals, ready to eat), and water under MC-1B static-line parachutes.

After a good canopy, I released my folded ATB in an airdrop bag on a lowering line for landing. Lieutenant Johnson's and Sergeant Hoppe's non-folding ATBs were on an airdrop platform with an all-terrain all-purpose cart (ATAC) rigged to a G-13 cargo parachute. After unfolding my ATB and assembling it (in less than five minutes), we executed a hostage rescue, then exfiltrated 30 miles by bicycle to Fort Bragg. Lieutenant Johnson towed the cart to simulate a casualty evacuation.

Four folded ATBs will fit inside an A-21 CDS (container delivery system) container for door or ramp bundle airdrop, or one ATB attached to each paratrooper in an airdrop bag with lowering

line. No added airlift is needed to move ATB-mobile forces.

There is a long history of bicycles used for raids and reconnaissance: During World War II, Finnish *Jaegers* destroyed Soviet armor in their winter wars. German *Radfahrtruppen* seized objectives across Europe and most of Russia. The Japanese bicycle infantry seized Singapore and Malaya using infiltration attacks. British paratroopers jumped with folding bikes to capture components at Bruneval radar station.



Early test jump of folding all-terrain bicycle before airdrop bag was ready.

"Cycle-commandos" rapidly linked up with airborne units holding the Orne River canals on D-Day. A U.S. 82d Airborne Division paratrooper on a bike saved the day on Sicily by securing fire support to stop the Herman Goering Division at Biazza Ridge. Following the Spanish-American War in Cuba, the U.S. Army 25th Bicycle Infantry Corps put down riots under conditions similar to those in Haiti today. Today, ATBs are in use by the British 5th Airborne Brigade, Gurkhas, Special Air Service, Swiss bicycle regiments, Slovenian light

infantry, Singapore Special Forces snipers, and Dutch Royal Marines.

U.S. Army offensive ATB tactics should center on folding or compactable types with air, ground, and sea craft that can deliver them and infantry outside sensor and sight or hearing range of the enemy. This protects the motor-driven delivery craft from enemy detection and fires, air defenses using ATBs' speed and stealth to reach a close foot assault position (where the bikes are cached), surprising the enemy. "Thellie" infrared (IR) camouflage clothing worn by ETB-mobile forces makes them invisible to any army equipped with IR viewers.

For movement security, a six-man ATB team would have two three-man "wings." The lead scout would use an IR sight to detect people, mines, or booby-traps along the route patrol.

All team members should wear Ranger body armor, PASGT kevlar helmets with AN/PVS-7B night vision goggle interface and squad intercommunications system to ensure that information is passed laterally. When close to the enemy, the "wings" would move and cover each other by bounding overwatch. (The best reference is Major Stephen Tate's 1989 U.S. Army Command and General College master's thesis, "Human Powered Vehicles in Support of Light Infantry Operations," available from the Defense Technical Information Center (DTIC), File Number AD A211 795.)

The 21-speed folding ATB is available from the Army and Air Force Exchange Service post exchange catalog. Our military-hardened ATBs have solid foam inner tubes to prevent flat tires, rear storage racks for rucksacks, and mini-Allen wrenches on the folding point lug nuts for quick folding and unfolding, and they are painted in a subdued color (brown works in both woodland and desert areas).

Still better are extreme terrain bikes (ETBs), with 10-inch wide ATV tires that ride over soft sand and snow. Areas with unimproved roads are ideally suited for ATB mobile infantry units moving from drop or STOL assault zones on the outskirts of cities to seize road blocking positions to capture fleeing

enemy leaders and establish the reconnaissance and security line.

A foot march from the drop zone is slow (three miles per hour) and risks decisive engagement by mobs and paramilitary forces. A motor march requires either lengthy de-rigging of airdropped vehicles from fixed-wing aircraft or noisy helicopter flight from offshore ships. Motor vehicles are noisy, they require wide streets to pass, and can be stopped by barricades and small arms or mine ambushes. ATB forces in position can prevent or disrupt road barricades and ambushes, allowing air-delivered motor vehicles to enter cities. Experiences in Somalia showed that motor-driven vehicles are vulnerable to urban ambush.

Current ground reconnaissance assets are either static or use motor vehicles and are thus incompatible for fluid situations where many enemy informants observe a few congested roads. Maneuver units need a wide reconnaissance screen that disseminates digital intelligence for maximum value. In the Falklands, a British SAS mobile reconnaissance team tracked down and destroyed Argentine troop transport helicopters intended for massed counter-attack. The Argentines moved their helicopters daily to avoid detection, but the SAS team followed aggressively—at night and using camouflage nets over hasty daytime positions.

An ATB-mobile reconnaissance strike team could parachute several miles away from planned drop zones for airborne troops, move rapidly to recon the DZs, and then move into blocking positions to keep the enemy at bay until the main body arrived. On signal, the team would move quickly and silently ahead of the division's planned axis of advance, giving them advance warning of enemy actions, so the enemy's forces could be properly engaged and his unarmed civilian mobs avoided.

The ATBs' silence, small size, and air-deliverability enable a mobile long-range surveillance team to move at night using night vision goggles into temporary but well-camouflaged "hides" using "Thellie" clothing and nets, with further flexibility to move to new observation

points as the situation dictates, covering several named areas of interest and ensuring that we have a constant flow of information on enemy actions to the corps G-2. Unlike observation aircraft, ground ATB-mobile reconnaissance teams can loiter in an area indefinitely without alerting an enemy as would a helicopter flying overhead.

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RETURN TO OKINAWA FOR 50TH ANNIVERSARY

Veterans of all services who fought in or supported the Okinawa campaign in the spring of 1945 are invited to join members of the 1st Marine Division Association in a return to Okinawa, 19-25 June 1995.

The Tenth Army Expeditionary Troops, composed of the III Marine Amphibious Corps and the XXIV U.S. Army Corps, attacked Okinawa proper on 1 April 1945 and gained control of the island chain over the next 82 days.

For information on the return to Okinawa, anyone who is interested may write to Colonel Warren H. Wiedhahn, USMC Retired, Box 1179, Arlington, VA 22313-2375.

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