

Patrol-Based Infantry Doctrine

WILLIAM F. OWEN

"The infantryman has to use initiative and intelligence in almost every step he moves, every action he takes on the battlefield. We ought therefore to put our men of best intelligence and endurance into the Infantry."

Field Marshal Earl Wavell

First published in *The Times*, Thursday, April 19, 1945

The purpose of this article is to describe an alternate tactical doctrine, training, and organization for light infantry units and subunits. The intended purpose of presenting an alternative is not to criticize current or existing concepts, but to aid thought and understanding by showing an alternative that may have some positive merit, if correctly understood and applied.

Before examining patrol-based infantry doctrine (PBID) in detail, it is necessary to explain what it is not.

First, it is not an entirely original idea. It is in fact a collection of concepts that have been brought together because each individual idea or technique has a strong, logical, and coherent relationship with another. Many of the parts have been or are regularly practiced in the normal course of operations or training. The aim of bringing them together is to build from those logical and coherent relationships in order to maximize the effectiveness of light infantry units.

Second, it is nothing to do with Special Forces. Current fashionable obsessions with SF, and the ill-conceived promotion of certain formations as being uniquely tactically proficient, have led to what little amount of useful alternate infantry thought there is in the United Kingdom being labeled as "SF tactics" and thus suffering from all the less-than-positive understanding that brings. With the exception of some specialist roles, Special Forces are arguably a light infantry formation, and it is that iteration of their operational techniques, which some aspects of PBI replicate.

Related to this, a short history lesson of infantry may be instructive. Close order infantry battles in the 19th century saw the emergence of riflemen, skirmishers, and sharp shooters fighting in a dispersed fashion and often employing field craft. By the early 20th century, this was often characterized as "Boer tactics" in respect of the tactics employed by Afrikaners fighting the British. The open order tactics that developed from the 1870s onward were found to be woefully inadequate for the operational conditions of World War I. These tactical concepts developed into the basis of what modern infantry tactics are today. Starting in about the late 1930s and continuing throughout the 1940s, a parallel course of development began, which culminated in various types of Special Forces, or specialist light infantry units. Often called raider battalions, commandos or rangers, these units were given considerable leeway to develop their own tactical doctrine. Indeed, the U.S. Marine Corps cherry-picked a large part of what was developed in the Raider battalions for use in regular USMC battalions. Large elements of tactical teaching currently employed in modern armies are traceable to their origin in Special Forces. The utility of some of the techniques developed in SF is that they have



grown from what works and not what is taught, because SF have been free to develop such techniques without interference. Taking all this into account, it would seem possible that we have for a time been moving from the age of the “post close order infantry” to “patrol-based infantry.”

PBID essentially suggests that you train, organize, and operate light infantry in a way that best utilizes their inherent strengths. In practice, this means that you train infantry to accomplish two basic tasks, these being a reconnaissance patrol and an observation post. These two core skills are built on a high level of individually developed field-craft skills. In simplistic but easily understood terms, you train Soldiers as snipers and then train them as a recon platoon.

Why? Surely this is completely against the teaching that only the brightest, best, and most experienced of infantry unit Soldiers become snipers and members of the recon platoons. If the first core function is “find” and the most intangible qualifier of success in operations is information, then “recon-centric” infantry may well be extremely useful. Critical to understanding what is advocated here is the point that this is suggested as the benchmark for all light infantry units, not just specialist recon formations.

Both the reality of current operations as well as the future of warfare and conflict is arguably “light infantry centric.” Only light forces can confront all possible adversaries across the spectrum of operations. Correctly trained, equipped and resourced, they can destroy, dislocate and attrite armored formations, as well as engage criminal/terrorist gangs in a complex urban or rural environment.

The often-raised criticism that light infantry are inherently vulnerable because they lack protected mobility, is only a perception borne of the limiting tactical thought that defines a unit by the method they use for mobility, be it airborne, Marine, mechanized or armor. A light infantry Soldier can use a landing craft, helicopter, armored personnel carrier (APC) or mechanized infantry combat vehicle (MICV), without detracting from his light role utility.

Correctly selected, trained, equipped and motivated, the light infantryman is cost effective, rapidly deployable, and flexible. The ability to achieve the missions likely to be demanded of militaries by societies and governments will call for well-educated Soldiers being able to operate in increasingly isolated and complex situations. The barely post-conscript training doctrines prevalent in the world today are ill suited to future operations. The drill, boot and bayonet approach is already at the limits of what it can usefully contribute. We can no longer afford to constantly add to the layers of process and TTPs (tactics, techniques and procedures) to address the training that complex situations demand. Good light infantry may well have to prosecute a three-block war, that has none of the clear distinction that General Krulak’s legendary analogy provided. The future light infantryman may well find himself fighting and handing out aid at the same time! How useful is it to view peacekeeping as something requiring training distinct from anti-armor operations? While obviously concerned with different threats, recent operations have shown that you may have

“There is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle, than to initiate a new order of things. For the reformer has enemies in all those who profit by the old order, and only lukewarm defenders in all those who would profit by the new order.”

NICCOLO MACHIAVEILLI,
First published in
The Prince, 1513

to go from anti-armor operations to peacekeeping in less than an hour. Forces configured and trained for only one type of warfare are at a distinct disadvantage. What is needed is a coherent and logical approach to terrain, technology, tactics, training, and threat. What defeats an enemy in the jungle is exactly the same as that which defeats him on urban terrain. All the fundamentals are identical and the only difference comes in some detail of TTPs, that all have to be applied in a context specific to the operation. Popular military myth seeks to characterize the urban environment as vastly demanding.

What actually makes urban terrain a challenge, in the context of modern operations, is the civil population. This should be self evident to any Soldier educated to that fact. Civil populations could also be present in contested jungle or forest areas due to a refugee crisis or ethnic cleansing.

To face these challenges, PBID requires a doctrine that is cognizant of them. The doctrine that is envisaged here is what is taught. It is the education you give to your Soldiers. For example he is taught how to apply the core functions of “find, fix, strike, and exploit.” The default setting is not enemy armor formation smashing or attack bunkers in general war, because there is no default setting. Conflict is a spectrum of conditions. He is also taught to create and apply “fire and maneuver effects” as in surprise, shock, suppression and isolation across the spectrum of conflict employing rules of engagement (ROEs). He is also educated in tactical dichotomies such as security versus activity, and directive command versus restrictive command. From this grows an understanding that nothing on operations is absolute and judgement is critical, as it is in anyone’s normal life.

Education is central to training patrol-based infantry. This doesn’t mean you need Soldiers with high academic standards. Rather it is just basic common sense. He must be able to understand and apply concepts as about as complex as those we require of policemen or skilled trades working on building sites. It is not the role of a modern volunteer army to act as social security for those with nowhere else to go. The PB Soldier must be a robust and determined individual, with a useable level of common sense, and arguably some modern armies do contain a significant percentage of such men, and even women.

A PB Soldier is taught to navigate and live in the field as an individual. He is required to accomplish tests of navigation in both urban and rural terrain, possibly utilizing not just conventional maps but also aerial photographs and sketches. He must prove himself reliant when isolated and he must achieve a useable basic level of first aid and NBC skills. He is taught individual field craft and stalking in much the same way snipers are traditionally trained, and ultimately, he is taught to shoot under field rather than range conditions. Shooting is always applied in relationship to ROEs and under simulated operational conditions. For example, the ability to engage small limited exposure targets at varying ranges from the standing or crouched position would be emphasized over prone grouping at 100 meters, and simulation would seem to promise significant benefits in this regard. This



Tech Sergeant John M. Foster, USAF

A PB soldier is taught to navigate and live in the field as an individual.

would include both Smart Ranges and the adaptation of TESEX (Tactical Engagement Simulation) type equipment.

Antipathetic to PBI is the didactic “this is the way you do it” training commonly utilized by some armies. The PB Soldier is told what the required end or operating state is, and then shown examples and common errors. He is then free to create his own solutions under critique and guidance from instructors.

Once the PB infantryman has graduated from individual training, having been assessed by an independent examiner, he advances to his patrol training.

Patrol training is based on operating as part of a three-to-five-man fireteam to accomplish reconnaissance patrols and observation posts. Again, this is taught in the context of both conventional warfighting and anti-terrorist or peacekeeping scenarios in all types of terrain. The aim of the training is to get each fireteam to develop a range of SOPs under the guidance of instructors, and for those SOPs to flow from simple rapid and eventually intuitive decisions, rather than mindlessly and didactically applied drills. Each team member is also given the chance to plan and lead patrols so that those with NCO and officer potential can be identified early on.

When teams can demonstrate the required level of competence and experience, they are brought together to form multiples of three-to-five fireteams working together or under the control of a headquarters team. They then train together as a multiple of varying size, dependent on the task. This is really very simple, bearing in mind what they have done so far. For example, an ambush is really just a series of OPs. All the routines required have been previously perfected. Likewise, a multiple harbor is just a collection of observation posts (OPs), arranged in the way that best uses terrain and control. This even extends up to the layout and routine of defensive positions.

Offensive operations are merely outgrowths and adaptations of what has already been previously learned as contact drills. For example, a point team makes contact, and teams two and three will either go left flanking to isolate and suppress the enemy or will move to cut off his escape. This is dependant on context and biased to the required choice of either teams firing or teams moving, plus a reserve and exploitation element. Again, Soldiers or NCOs under training are not told, “This is the way you must do it!” They are taught a raft of techniques and concepts that generate effects both on the enemy and

themselves. In fact such offensive action by multiple fireteams has been both widely discussed and subject to trials by the UK and in the case of the trials proved largely successful. From this flows a reduction in process. You don’t have to mark and secure lines of departure if your fireteams can locate an already occupied final rendezvous point (FRV)/OP where they are told, “Go 50 meters to the left on a bearing of 185. Enemy is bearing 275. Stand by to move on my command.”

Lastly, teams can progress to being the basis for manning support weapons such as guided weapons or sustained fire machine guns. Thus, dependant on threat, multiples can contain teams with a variety of weapons systems.

Dependant on the basic level of physical fitness on entry, the total training time is something less than 12 weeks for someone with no infantry experience.

Critical to PBI is finding the right man, and it is more critical today than ever before. Western armies are small, meaning that force densities are almost always low. The extremely promising emerging concept of “distributed operations” may well see small light infantry units initiating and cueing effects, in situations where the operational objectives are constantly shifting and ambiguous. The actions of a very few will therefore have far wider ranging impact than before and conventional military success will not always lie with the conventionally militarily successful. Societies’ and politicians’ peculiar expectations of conflict and armed force conspire against the purely military mass based solution. The “strategic corporal” must cease being a figure of comforting myth and be born into actual existence, lest his less-than-able colleagues are ever recorded beating someone to death unaware that they are live on a satellite news channel!

While recruiting seeks to attract officers who are the brightest and the best, by fast tracking them past the banality of life in the ranks and straight to a life in the

officers' mess, no such imperative seems to exist for placing a man of similar ambition or potential to serve as a Soldier or NCO. PBI would demand a high caliber of determined individual, and he would have to be subject to some form of nonphysical fitness-based selection, such as being able to perform tasks that require a degree of physical courage, such as a civilian parachute jump. Why would any army want an infantry man that could not accomplish something 17-year-old school girls seem to manage with ease in two days, and if left in the hands of approved civilian organizations is cheap and easy to accomplish? That, combined with such techniques as psychometric testing and, of course, milling should be ample!

PBI also comprises other critical elements. Load carrying and the choice of fireteam weapons are not explicitly recommended in PBI, but principles to exist based on both historical and operational analysis. The need for a fireteam to achieve both active and passive forms of suppression, (by either a light machine gun, or by close precision engagement) as well as being able to project high explosives (HE) is all fairly fundamental and well understood. The benefits of training and equipping the multiple headquarters as a target find/sniper team are likewise obvious and achievable with current common equipment types.

The need to lighten and manage the infantryman's load is based around the fundamentals of the patrol mission that envisages and allows for each Soldier being recovered to a point where he can securely administer himself from equipment and personal effects held by the unit. The idea that he has to carry everything he might ever need, everywhere he goes, is simply ludicrous and removed from operational reality. The use of simulated ammunition natures being carried on all training would also help replicate real

operational loads, and promote rational approaches to load carrying.

Unit organization is also addressed as part of PBI. A subunit contains an HQ and three-to-five multiples. In each subunit, one multiple may be scaled with support weapons teams, as in 60mm mortars and Light Forces Guided Weapons, dependant on threat and ROE.

The unit acts as a clearinghouse for support, planning and C3I (command, control, communications, intelligence), employing an HQ team. The difference between this and conventional concepts is that formation level assets would provide combat service support and indirect fire. Why not?

As already conceded, the PBI Soldier will be a different from the majority of men that currently occupy posts in conventional infantry units. Currently, dependant on order of battle, some infantry units have as much as 39 percent of their manpower in combat service and support (CSS) and non-directly engaged roles, such as assault pioneer and mortar platoons. Essentially what this suggests is that those from other arms could man 39 percent of some infantry units or vice-versa. Why go to the expense time and trouble to train a PB infantry man, only for him to arrive in a unit to be a driver, signaler or, God forbid, a mess waiter!

The personnel selection criteria, already outlined for PBI, suggests that not everyone can be or stay a PB infantryman. This doesn't mean that some patriotic well-meaning soul, who just happens to lack the ability to be PBI, cannot usefully serve his country in support of them, by serving in specialist units that provide CSS and fire support to deployed PB-type formations.

Also key is the concept of "bottom up" training. A true PB-based unit would actually have little in the way of tactical training

manuals or pamphlets, since the unit itself would develop its own TTPs in line with doctrine and constantly reviewed central guidance. For example, a multiple commander would tell an NCO to develop a method of conducting a vehicle checkpoint (VCP), with between two-to-five teams in a multiple. The NCO would then present the problem to the men and all would contribute with ideas. He might even review previous relevant techniques, recorded in the unit-training library and/or held on electronic media. A technique would then be formulated, and demonstrated to the officer responsible, who may have given the same training task to several multiples. Each technique would be checked against doctrine, such as the core functions to see if the approaching car was:

- a) Detected or found;
- b) Brought to a safe halt or fixed;
- c) Struck, as in the driver and vehicle were identified, etc.

All techniques would be demonstrated, critiqued, refined and



Tech Sergeant Andy Dunaway, USAF

A Soldier with the 4th Squadron, 14th Cavalry Regiment, radios information on the movement of Iraqi civilians as fellow Soldiers and Marines search for insurgents near the Syrian border.

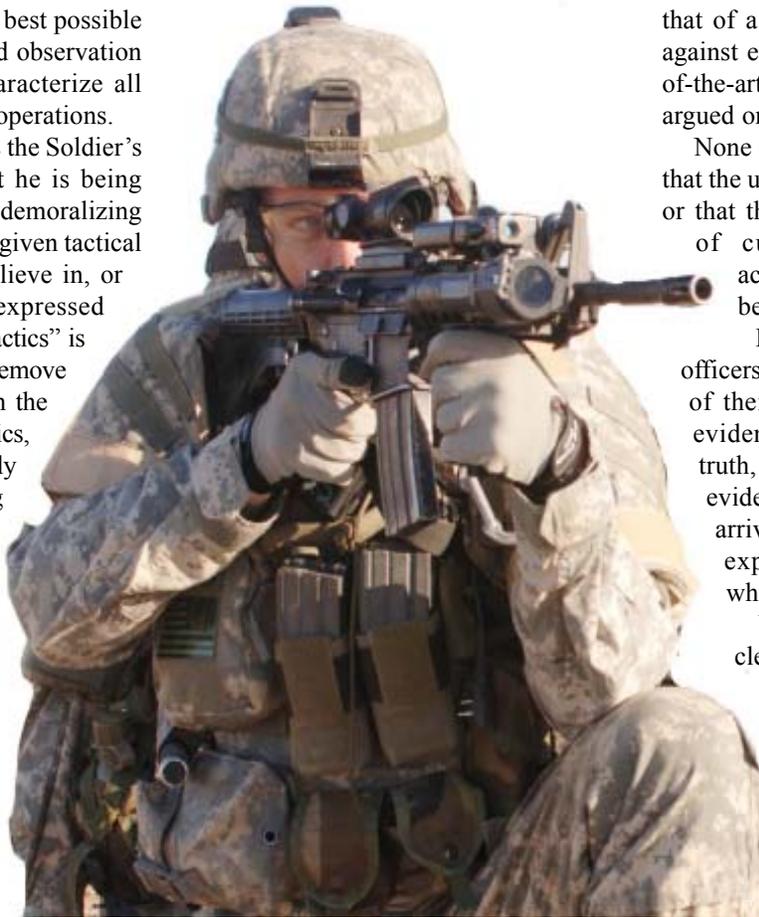
recorded, so as to present the best possible raft of solutions. Critique and observation by all ranks would also characterize all debrief both in training and operations.

Central to such concepts is the Soldier's belief in ownership of what he is being asked to do. Nothing is more demoralizing to an infantryman than being given tactical doctrine that he does not believe in, or has no faith in. The often-expressed belief that you "can't argue tactics" is symptomatic of the desire to remove tactical decision making from the Soldier. If you can't argue tactics, or at the very least constructively discuss them, then Soldiering is simply the product of arbitrary opinion, masquerading as a profession. Tactical discussion is often glibly denigrated as being "combat boot lacing" or "below my pay grade." This is a strange approach when the fate of modern armies may well be decided by the actions of platoons or similar groupings.

Experience shows that most negative reaction to concepts such as PBI is largely based on two basic beliefs.

The first is that the majority of Soldiers are too stupid to understand what some believe to be a complex idea, and the second is that any entertaining of such an alternative doctrine would fatally undermine current concepts.

First, the idea is probably not complex. It is fundamentally simple and logical, as is 90 percent of real world infantry work once broken down into its component parts. It is only the layers of process that we insist on adding that make it appear complex. Stripped of its comic book mystique, sniping is a fundamentally simple skill; however arcane its exponents wish it to appear. It can also be taught and applied simply, and thorough practice and experience will almost always lead to a useful degree of skill. Someone unable to master its most basic knowledge and application probably has no place in an infantry unit. The absolute enemy of PBI is process, as expressed in the proliferation of procedure and drill. The aim of process and drill is to reduce judgement because judgement allows for error. The aim of PB



is to require simple and rapid decisions at the lowest level.

Second, considering an alternative should not be considered a heresy. Since when was the acme of any profession slavishly adhering to what was written in the manual? The enemy of innovation is complacency or the inability to admit that better ways might or do exist. It may be that those better ways are impossible to implement because of the added priority that is given to such concepts as tradition, class or social structure and even cost. Cost, in particular, is a strong driver and in the current procurement climate, making things cheaper is as bad as making them more expensive. For example, PB doctrine is based on using purely digitally encrypted voice only communication, with or without separate handheld military GPS. In armies wedded to digitized net-centric concepts, instead of human-centric concepts, this is instantly seen as a bad thing. Anything cheap is instantly suspect. Bizarrely, we live in a world that shows that civilian specification sleeping bags are cheaper, lighter and superior to most military ones, and probably have a unit cost of less than

that of a mortar bomb. Yet the argument against equipping infantrymen with state-of-the-art equipment and clothing is always argued on grounds of cost.

None of what has gone before suggests that the unthinkable should not be thought, or that the irrelevances and complexities of current systems need to be acknowledged, even if they cannot be changed.

It is all too easy to say that some officers and NCOs are often so convinced of their prejudices that no amount of evidence will change their minds. In truth, some considerable parts of such evidence are lacking and could only be arrived at by truly objective trials and experimentation, but why change when there is no need to?

Whether or not there is a need is clearly open to debate. Concepts such as distributed operations will make some form of PBI type training essential, if it is not to be the sole preserve of Special Forces and thus of limited utility. It was identified as far back as 1945 that the infantry needed and required men of above average intelligence and determination,

but the vested interests inherent in most armies have never let it happen.

Fundamentally, this article is not about advocating change (despite the language used). It is about advocating ideas and concepts that might lead to greater understanding. This is a subtle but critical difference. While it is entirely possible to try or even implement the ideas discussed here, it is also recognized that they would be fiercely resisted for some of the reasons already outlined.

As conceded at the start, PBI is not original. Much of it is already done, and well understood, though not in the context of what is advocated. It is entirely possible that, because of the emphasis given to non-operational drivers, PBI may have no discernable merit but there may be merit in someone asking, "what is this PBI stuff and how does it work?"

William F. Owen joined the British Army in 1981 and served in both regular and territorial units until 1993. He is currently a broadcaster and writer specializing in armed conflict and military thought. He has also written a book on infantry and dismounted operations and is the author of *Blackfoot is Missing*.
