



THE AMERICAN HOPLITE

EVOLUTION OF THE INFANTRYMAN

CPT MICHAEL T. WARNOCK, JR

Much debate has been generated by Victor Davis Hanson's thesis promulgating a continuous Western way of war that can be traced back 2,500 years to the ancient Greek hoplite — which is detailed extensively in his book *Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power*. In his thesis, Hanson described commonalities associated with the hoplite that persist through each succeeding incarnation of the Western warrior that includes today's fighting man. Although the subject of this work draws some inspiration from his argument, the goal is to neither validate nor criticize these claims. Instead, the purpose of this discourse is to examine, with specificity, those similarities that exist between the hoplite of ancient Greece and the modern U.S. Infantry Soldier.

To be sure, there are a many differences between them — perhaps more than any actual similarities. However, one must keep in mind that these two warriors lived and fought, literally, worlds apart. Geography, culture and more than 2,000 years of history separate the Greek hoplite and U.S. Infantry Soldier. These warriors represent the alpha and omega of the Western warfighter, and it is remarkable that any similarities, as such, are present. An analysis of the two groups reveals that, despite their diametric positions in military history, such congruity does exist — both subtle and profound.

Analogous to the hoplite is the American infantryman's relationship to his non-Western counterparts, for the "Greeks lived in political freedom, while barbarians, under their kings, lived in political servitude," wrote Harry Sidebottom in his book *Ancient Warfare: A Very Short Introduction*. Moreover, like American Soldiers, hoplites were citizens of their polis (Greek city-state) and literally fought to maintain their freedom. Of significant importance is the fact that, with some exceptions, the Soldiers of ancient Greece and the United States share the status of *citizen* with a voice in their respective governments. This produces a similar motivation in both fighting men. John Lynn, in *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture*, described the hoplite as

neither coerced into battle nor driven by material gain, but rather impelled, largely, by his own civic values and concern for community and family — does this not also apply to the American warrior of today?

Similarities in Warfare

Discipline and unit cohesion are hallmarks of the Western way of war and native to both the hoplite and U.S. infantryman. The phalanx, with its close lines and locked shields, is often touted as the epitome of Western military discipline. While this battle formation has faded to history, its legacy leaves an enduring mark on the drill and ceremony evinced by the modern Soldier. According to the Roman military writer, Onasander, the hoplites "...had fought best with brother 'in rank beside brother, friend beside friend...'" (*World History of Warfare* by Christon I. Archer, John R. Ferris, Holger H. Herwig and Timothy H.E. Travers). Consequently, hoplites forged close-knit bonds that vastly increased their combat

effectiveness. Geoffrey Parker, in *The Cambridge Illustrated History of Warfare: The Triumph of the West*, noted that the modern military experiences can produce similar results: "Repeated group activities, whether directly related to combat (firing practice) or not (drill), all have the effect of creating artificial kinship groups...[which are] further



reinforced by the creation of small fellowships within the unit in order to increase cohesion and therefore combat efficiency even further.”

Nonetheless, the presence of unit cohesion is for naught without the addition of another crucial Western military staple: superior equipment and tactics. The hoplite proved so effective in battle that several other peoples, from the Greeks to Etruscans and then from Etruscans to the Romans, emulated the hoplite’s method and means of war, according to A. M. Snodgrass in his article “The Hoplite Reform and History,” which appeared in Volume 85 of *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*. Such imitation exists today as Hanson rhetorically asked, “... why [does] an AK-47 and M-16 appear almost identical?” Furthermore, private security companies, such as Blackwater Worldwide actively recruit U.S. trained warfighters. Today, as it was in Ancient Greece, it is American tools and methods of warfare that are most prized. For example, a primary function of the U.S. Special Forces Soldier is to train and advise foreign allied military and paramilitary forces.

One of the most striking similarities between the hoplite and U.S. infantryman is the weight of the implements of war each brings to the fight. The hoplite donned a heavy panoply of arms and armor that is estimated to weigh from 40 to 70 pounds, according to Lynn. This greatly impacted the hoplite, as he could not traverse great distances so encumbered. Thus, hoplites did not suit up until just before battle and often relied on horses to transport them to and from the battlefield. Today, the U.S. Army also wrestles with the problem of overburdening the infantryman with similar or even heavier combat loads. This has become such an issue that the U.S. Army Chief of Staff has directed that by 2010 a Soldier’s combat load is not to exceed 50 pounds.

These cumbersome loads include superior armor, whether interceptor body armor currently worn in Iraq or a breastplate worn in ancient Greece, as well as superior arms — such as an M-16 with an M203 grenade launcher or spear and short sword. Today’s infantryman wields an assortment of weaponry developed and employed to kill the enemy with deadly efficiency. Lynn noted that likewise, “...hoplites opted for weapons that inflicted the kind of fatal blows

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that won battles rather than those that were more likely to wound and wear down the enemy.”

The Western pursuit of superior arms and equipment has been reinforced by a history of engaging a numerically superior enemy. Whereas the hoplite fought against a Persian army vastly larger than his own, the U.S. infantryman is stretched across the world engaging enemies, which also outnumber him, in two major theaters. It is here that another similarity can be traced between the two. Edmund M. Burke noted, in “The Economy of Athens in the Classical Era: Some Adjustments to the Primitivist Model” from *Transactions of the American Philological Association*: “Significant change occurred in the character of Greek warfare in the Classical era... The demands imposed by foreign initiatives and experience gained over time effected innovation in strategy and tactics. Thus, we find that increasingly campaigns are conducted far afield ... sometimes for extended periods, strategic positions are occupied and held ... The mercenary also begins to be used with greater frequency, and the non-hoplite specialist makes his appearance.”

Consequently, the world has seen the integration of both the hoplite and U.S. Soldier with other armed services. For both warriors, there came a time when the army could no longer defend the state’s strategic interests without assistance. Both the Greeks and Americans required force projection. Thus, for the hoplite, Burke observed, “...it was the [naval] fleet that had become the city’s principal weapon of foreign policy.” Meanwhile, the U.S. infantryman of today relies on both air and sea power, not only to deliver him to the fight, but also to support him on the battlefield. Whereas the ancient Greeks maintained and deployed a fleet of naval forces to protect their interests abroad, the

United States utilizes a fleet of naval and air forces to similar effect.

Both in terms of manpower and financing, projecting and sustaining forces across great distances dramatically increases the costs associated with war. Consequently, the ancient Greeks relied upon mercenaries to meet their wartime needs. Likewise, the U.S. today finds itself employing contracted security forces in Iraq to meet mission requirements. Furthermore, although references are often made that the hoplite was first and foremost a citizen-warrior, this was not always the case. The Greeks also utilized non-citizen metics to fill their hoplite ranks, according to A.W. Gomme in his article “The Athenian Hoplite Force in 431 B.C.” which appeared in the June-October 1927 issue of *The Classical Quarterly*. Similarly, citizenship is not a requirement for enlistment in the U.S. Army. In fact, a benefit of military service is accelerated U.S. citizenship.

Similar Sociopolitical Aspects

The hoplite and U.S. infantryman also hold comparable political power within each of their societies. At the heart of American democracy lies the middle class — which the U.S. military comprises. Likewise, as a citizen-soldier, the hoplite’s valued place in society caused “... political power [to be] shifted to the middle class, with... a middle-class democracy as the political consequence,” according to Mary E. White in her article “Greek Colonization,” which appeared in a 1961 issue of *The Journal of Economic History*. Thus, although the hoplite contributed to the formation of a middle class in ancient Greece, while the U.S. Soldier is largely a product of the middle class — both are of similar socioeconomic backgrounds with comparable political power. The hoplite, as well as the Soldier of today is recognized as an essential contributor to the common defense of his people and survival of the state.

One of the major parallels between the hoplite and U.S. infantryman is their inevitable collaboration with other branches of the military. Although alluded to earlier, this also produced similar political controversies in both the Greek city-state and American governments. Charles W. Fornara described the Greek experience in his article “The Hoplite Achievement at

Psyttaleia,” which was published in a 1966 issue of *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*. He wrote, “The social and political implications of a hoplite army and a sailor’s navy entailed for liberals and conservatives the keenest opposition in their evaluation of either arm. By and large ... conservatives viewed the growth of the Athenian navy with a distrust that was matched by the hostility of the liberal to the hoplite army. Each group will have asserted, indeed, overstated, achievements present and past.”

This is not unlike the political battles fought between the various armed services of the United States. Similar to the Athenian example, strategic necessity, as well as budgetary constraints requires greater cooperation among the various branches of the U.S. military. In recent years, the ever-increasing push towards joint operations has been impeded by, and in fact contributed to, interservice rivalries. Each component fights to maintain its own distinct culture and identity as it vies for dollars and competes for relevancy. To an extent, this is also reflected in the service member. Asking a U.S. Soldier, Sailor, Airman, or Marine to opine on any one of his or her counterparts is likely to yield a mixed bag of obstinate comments. One can only guess at the remarks a hoplite might utter regarding the oarsmen who propelled the triremes of the Greek navy.

Nevertheless, during combat such rivalries are typically marginalized and usually set aside. When a U.S. service member is killed in action, great lengths are undertaken to recover the body. This is exemplified during a firefight in Afghanistan when Soldiers risk their own lives to retrieve a fallen comrade, or, alternately, demonstrated years after a battle as searchers scour the jungles of Vietnam for the remains of a lost combat veteran. Yet, American society demands more than just the physical recovery of its fallen Soldiers, they must also be *identified*. For example, some 58,000 names are carved into the black granite of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial — and when a warfighter cannot be identified, the Tomb of the Unknowns fills the nameless void. American television frequently updates the public with the latest numbers of combat fatalities, reverently displaying the rank, name and picture of each.

The hoplite killed in action could also expect treatment equitable to that of a U.S. Soldier, as noted by W. G. Runciman in “Greek Hoplitess, Warrior Culture, and Indirect Bias” from *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*: “...the Greek poleis went to altogether exceptional lengths to recover, identify and bury their dead in battle and commemorate them individually by name. At Athens, an empty bier was garlanded and carried in the funeral procession for any whose bodies were missing ...”

Both warriors are venerated by their respective societies, in part, because they are, for the most part, citizens of a consensual government. Although, each bears civic duties and responsibilities, the governments that send them to war ultimately do so with the people’s blessing. Nevertheless, even a free society must maintain warriors to provide for its security. A common, though controversial, notion among military historians posits that Soldiers produced from free societies, like the hoplite and U.S. infantryman, share certain intangible qualities not demonstrated elsewhere. The created result is that which Hanson calls *civic militarism*. It is a term he described as “...the idea that a citizen has particular rights as an individual that transfer into battle.”

Hanson attributed the products of civic militarism — a sense of

duty, equality and fighting to protect one’s freedom — as contributors to Western success on the battlefield. He argued that these ideals uniquely inspire Soldiers in combat, but that civic militarism can only thrive in free societies with consensual governments. Although the continuity of this phenomenon throughout Western military history is debatable, the prerequisite conditions noted by Hanson are present for both the hoplite and U.S. infantry Soldier fighting today.

The fruits of civic militarism can also be discerned through a negative contrast such as the mercenary, who fights purely for material gain. As previously discussed, mercenaries were utilized in hoplite warfare and are currently employed by the U.S. government in support of its existing wartime mission. The introduction of hired soldiers, whether 2,500 years ago or today, alters the dynamics of war, but also significantly impacts society. Again, Runciman commented: “Mercenaries thus became important ... because of their effect on the norms, values and beliefs which had sustained the role of the citizen-hoplite as such.”

Mercenaries do not fight out of a sense of duty or allegiance to the state. Although they may be professionals, there are inherent differences in their motivations and this frequently translates to codes of conduct that conflict with the citizen-soldier. Furthermore, as they fall outside the realm of serving the government for which they fight, mercenaries often do not emulate, nor are they subject to, the same standards as their state-sponsored counterparts. Today in Iraq, for example, reports of misconduct by Blackwater employees have strained relations between the Iraqi and U.S. governments and is further compounded by the complexities of holding contractors accountable. Nevertheless, similar to Athens, the U.S. finds itself in the precarious position of requiring the use of contracted security with close coordination of its military forces. One could argue that the addition of mercenaries dilutes the homogeneity of its military, both in terms of cohesion amongst soldiers and civic militarism. The diminishment of both poses significant problems for any military, but also potentially impacts society as a whole, whether modern American or ancient Greek.

If this is indeed the case for the U.S. infantry Soldier, Runciman, also noted that the hoplite was no stranger to this scenario. He wrote, “The change was that willingness to risk death in battle on behalf of the *polis* of which he was a citizen could no longer be seen by the young Greek male as the supreme manifestation of virtue. He might still be brought up to admire the exploits of his forebears ... But the norms, values and beliefs which had motivated the citizen-warriors ... were increasingly unlikely to be replicated in an environment where military prowess was no longer a matter of courage and endurance so much as of the acquisition of the maximum booty with the minimum of risk.”

Thus, the fundamental distinction between the mercenary and soldier comes down to money. This seems an obvious, if not simple difference — yet potentially yields far-reaching societal consequences. Furthermore, the utilization of mercenaries, hoplite or otherwise, introduces pertinent economic considerations, which will be discussed hereafter.

Similar Economic Aspects

Despite the significant military and social ramifications of

employing mercenaries, arguably, the most direct effects are economic. Again, it is here that both the Grecian hoplite and American Soldier walk similar paths. The U.S. spends roughly a quarter of its budget on defense every year. Furthermore, costs of the war in Iraq are exacerbated by reliance on private security companies, i.e. mercenaries. For example, in the October 2, 2007, CNN article “Blackwater Chief disputes ‘baseless and negative allegations,’” author Suzanne Simons stated that the government pays Blackwater Worldwide “...\$1,200 a day for each contractor on the job in Iraq — between six and nine times the pay and allowances of an Army sergeant.” Likewise, hiring mercenaries proved exorbitantly expensive for the ancient Greeks. The authors of *The World History of Warfare* noted a similar situation in 5th century Athens: “Money was needed to maintain fleets and mercenaries and to keep citizen armies in the field for more than a few weeks ... Its enemies could not do so, and their fleets soon wasted away. In the last decade of the war, however, the balance of financial and maritime power turned. With its population declining, Athens could maintain the quality and quantity of its navy only by hiring more mercenary oarsmen, which it could no longer afford to do. Its reserves had declined to fifteen hundred talents [from sixty-five hundred talents] and its income decreased by half [from six hundred talents annually].”

When considering either the ancient Greek or the modern-day American economy, employment of mercenaries and the maintenance of fleets constitute a major portion of the debts incurred. Also, both the hoplite and U.S. infantryman have found themselves, to varying degrees, supplanted by mercenary warriors paid by the state, though not citizen-soldiers of the state.

Predominant Similarities

Perhaps the most significant similarity between the hoplite and modern U.S. infantryman stems from their status as a middle class member of a free society. It is from here one may speak in general terms without reference to one or the other. Not coincidentally, it is also from here that their other shared attributes seem to spring.

Whether one ascribes merit to such abstractions as civic militarism is largely irrelevant, for it is difficult to refute the bonds



SGT Richard Rzepka

A Soldier with the 1st Battalion, 327th Infantry Regiment takes up a fighting position during a mission along the banks of the Tigris River in October 2008.

forged by those who have bled and sacrificed on behalf of the state — which in the case of the hoplite and U.S. Soldier *is the people*. The result of fighting for one’s people, as opposed to money, fear or enslavement, manifests in far more than superior discipline. It is a formula for producing warriors with heart, who fight with genuine motivation and determination to win — not merely survival. Although history has demonstrated that this does not always occur, it is only in the free society, through consensual government, that the conditions are created in which this becomes a possibility. The next crucial step is taken by the individual accepting responsibility for the security of his fellow citizens.

This, in turn, gives rise to a society or “grateful nation” that remains aware that it owes its way of life to those same warriors. It is to those Soldiers that monuments are dedicated and names are read aloud in order to honor their sacrifices as can best be done. Free societies not only strive to furnish the best material support for its war fighters, such as superior arms and equipment, but also provide crucial intangible support that can only be given freely and without coercion. In an effort to best prepare their warriors for battle, they are often inadvertently weighted down with the tools of war intended to garner

success and maximize their safety.

In return, these Soldiers are sent to far away lands in an effort to better secure the freedoms and way of life enjoyed by their people. At times, this can prove too great a task for the citizen-soldier alone. Consequently, these warriors discover a dependence on fleets to not only carry them to war, but to help wage it. They may also find themselves in the necessary company of mercenaries. Nevertheless, such societies, regardless of their distaste for war or the costs associated with it, love their Soldiers and revere them in life and in death.

It is perhaps for this reason that students and historians of military history search for common traits, linking the soldiers of old to the warriors of today. It can be through this ardent search that one may find meaning within the violence, in an effort to pay homage to the sacrifices endured by those who have fought and died in battle. This also, in part, describes the appeal of attempting to define a Western way of war that spans 2,500 years.

CPT Michael T. Warnock, Jr., is the OIC of the Operating Room at Weed Army Community Hospital at Fort Irwin, Calif. He is currently pursuing graduate studies in military history through Norwich University.
