

Innovate, Adapt, and Win

The light infantry mindset
by Maj Brian Hinrichs

Since the events of 11 September 2001, the Marine Corps continues to find itself embroiled in many different operating environments. During these conflicts, the infantry community adapted its tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) for a variety of reasons. The Marine Corps invested in firepower, heavier armor, and more gear to solve the current problems. Over time, these changes altered the infantry from a light force to a heavier force. Infantry units now require much larger logistical footprints to account for changes in TTP and structure. These burdens ultimately limit the infantry to find, fix, and finish the enemy.¹ One solution to this problem is to identify with our pre-amphibious roots as a light infantry force: a force that was strategically mobile, required

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minimal support, and embodied the expeditionary mindset.

The most recent guidance contained in the *Marine Corps Operating Concept* (MOC [Washington, DC: HQMC, September 2016]), indicates the need for light infantry forces to be the default of the Marine Corps. The MOC states that the complex terrain and densely populated areas in which we will most likely find ourselves will make vehicular and airborne movement highly visible and increasingly difficult. Therefore, our forces will be challenged to find cov-

er and concealment while also achieving surprise. In addition to establishing many concepts and requirements for the future of the Marine Corps, the MOC also highlights the need to redefine our logistics to avoid iron mountains, establish mental and physical standards for infantry forces, and ensure our ability to conduct foot mobile operations in austere environments.²

Our leadership sees the requirements of the future. In accordance with Title 10, the Marine Corps is required to seize and defend advanced naval bases and conduct land operations necessary for the success of a naval campaign. Terrain in the littorals is often restricted for vehicle movement because of cliffs, mountains, swamps, or urban environments, thus necessitating the requirement for a foot mobile force that is less reliant on vehicles and logistics. More of our adversaries have the ability to identify our large mobile forces. Light infantry forces are harder to find, especially in restricted terrain.

Because of these realities, the infantry will be better prepared and employed if the community fully embraces its light infantry identity. Light infantry is deeply rooted in our history, and there are many articles written throughout the past three decades regarding the need for the infantry community to embrace light infantry tactics. However, the infantry has yet to fully commit. The good news is the Marine Corps continues to take many steps in gear and weapons procurement, advancement in technology, and training standards to move us closer to where we need to be. The final step the infantry must take is to identify as a light infantry force and advertise ourselves as such.



The Marine Corps needs to re-examine the light infantry model of a mobile, lightweight expeditionary force. (Photo by LCpl Teagan Fredericks.)

Light Infantry Defined

Light infantry refers to both the task organization and equipment of a unit as well as the mindset, or “tactical style,” of a unit. Both concepts developed over time to be distinct from what is commonly referred to as “line infantry.” In the time of the Greek city-states, light infantry was introduced to defend the flanks of the line infantry, otherwise known as the phalanx. The light infantry of the time relied on individual and small unit actions, which distinguished it from the regular infantry.³ As cavalry tactics advanced and dominated the battlefield, light infantry mostly faded away until later in the 17th and 18th centuries. During this time, the divide between light and line infantry was made more apparent because of advances in weapons and technology, specifically the breach-loading rifle and machine gun. This forced an evolution in the tactics of regular infantry formations to resemble the flexible, non-linear style of light infantry.⁴

Light infantry tactics remained static until World War I. Modern light infantry is often attributed to the German stormtroopers of 1918. Their tactics were characterized as infiltration tactics. From this point in military history, there are numerous examples of how light infantry is a critical operational capability within any armed force.⁵ Unfortunately, the U.S. military has more often found itself the victim of highly trained light infantry forces rather than being in possession of one. The Chinese Communist Forces during the Korean War, the North Vietnamese Army and Vietcong during the Vietnam War, and the various insurgent forces in Iraq and the Taliban in Afghanistan are but a few examples where light infantry has tactically outclassed our conventional infantry forces.

As stated earlier, the terminology of light infantry refers to two schools of thought that can be mutually implemented or exercised apart: how the unit is task organized and the tactical style of the unit. Both are critical in becoming a true light infantry force. From a task organization standpoint, light infantry forces lack organic heavy equipment, which consequently makes them more

strategically mobile and capable of responding to crisis. Tactical style often revolves around skirmishing, hit-and-run tactics, raids, ambushes, ruses, and guards for main forces.⁶ The infantry has more often been on the receiving end of these tactics in the recent past. However, the Marine Corps has this tactical attitude deep in its blood. Just reference Max Boot’s *Savage Wars of Peace* (New York, NY: Perseus Books Group, 2002) for numerous examples of the Marine Corps successfully defeating its enemies using these tactics in small war conflicts. In fact, one can safely assert that the Marine Corps has more light infantry character in its history than amphibious character. With a deeper understanding of the light infantry style, we can see that it is more of a mindset to be applied in any type of conflict.

Tactical Style and Attitude

Infiltration is a form of maneuver that can be found in our publications but that is not employed as often as the frontal and flank attacks. One reason may be that advances in fire support technology allow us to overwhelm our opponents, thus negating the need for surprise. However, that gap is quickly narrowing, even among non-state actors, so it is in the infantry’s best interest to embrace this style. Infiltration can be applied in many types of ways. The word infiltration typically brings about an image of units stealthily moving through enemy positions at night. Often a diversionary attack allows a supported force to conduct an infiltration. The goal is to gain positional advantage from which to conduct an attack or to disrupt “soft targets” in the enemy’s rear. This can force the enemy to turn its forces, alter its disposition, or withdraw forces from a “surface” to create a gap. Light infantry relies on this technique since it is typically smaller and more lightly equipped than its adversary.

A great example of an infiltration is the North Vietnamese Army and Vietcong assault of Hue City during the Vietnam War. Over the course of several days, the communist forces were able to surround the city with six battalions. During the night and morning of

the initial attack, company-sized units closed undetected to the walls of the city, namely the west wall of the famed Citadel. From their position, they were able to quickly overwhelm many of the gates and enter the city. They quickly seized the main airfield and attacked the main command and control locations for the entire zone.⁷ This greatly reduced the number of casualties taken outside the city while conserving much-needed resources for the brutal fighting in the weeks ahead.

The main lesson Marine Corps infantry should learn from this is to gain as much ground by stealth as possible instead of compromising the force earlier than necessary. This requires extensive training in night operations and continued advances in fire support because the initial contact is close, with little room for error.

As for the defense, light infantry utilizes ambushes, limited attacks, and mobility in restricted terrain to keep the enemy off balance. There are many historical examples, from the First Special Service Force in World War II to the defensive tactics of Hezbollah in the 2006 conflict with Israel. The ambush takes on a higher meaning than just a type of attack or patrol; it is a mindset that can be used to maintain the initiative and always take the enemy by surprise.

These tactics can be successful on their own or as part of a larger operation integrated with traditional line infantry tactics. As seen at Anzio, the First Special Service Force was utilized to guard the flank. Upon arriving, the units discovered German observation posts near to their position. Utilizing their light infantry style, they conducted constant combat patrols and raids to harass the German positions, forcing them to pull back their observation posts.⁸ Overall, light infantry maintains a more mobile, offensive, and active mentality in the defense. Oftentimes it is best used as a forward element or flank guard in rough terrain.

Since light infantry is often outnumbered, it must seek any possible advantage. The ability to *leverage the environment* to make up for inherent inferiorities is essential to the success

of a light infantry force. The ability to proficiently operate in non-illuminated environments is essential. A prime historical reference is the Chinese Communist Forces' infiltrations against American positions during the Korean War. On numerous occasions, the Chinese forces were able to completely infiltrate American lines at night, often attacking command and control and fire support capabilities prior to assaulting the front lines.

Light infantry must also be able to move, survive, and thrive in extremely rough terrain. This prevents a larger force from effectively massing as well as removes the advantages of a motorized or mechanized force. As a byproduct of operating in this type of terrain, light infantry forces often operate in smaller groups that can move quickly through this terrain and are more difficult to target.

The fact that light infantry units prefer to fight at night in close terrain means they often prefer close combat fights. Either through infiltration or ambush, they get close to their enemy to maximize the impact of their organic weapons systems. This means light infantry units must be highly proficient at the individual level with their weapons and be well trained in small unit tactics.

As stated previously, light infantry forces operate in a more decentralized manner out of necessity compared to line infantry forces—relying on mission tactics and mission type orders to accomplish missions. They are comfortable not having constant communications with small units. This makes them harder to locate and more adaptable to changing situations. In today's environment, the ability to reduce signatures of all kinds will become the primary force protection issue against a peer or near-peer adversary. In order to fight in this decentralized manner, light infantry units must be trained and equipped for independent operations.

Self-reliance. As an amphibious force, we understand that we must be able to operate in an austere environment. Some synonyms for austere include severe, harsh, and plain. Light infantry units throughout history possess a common trait in this realm: the ability



Marines are tasked to seize and defend advanced bases. (Photo by LtCol Jacob Hancock.)

to conduct operations with only their organic weapons systems. They do not rely on external air or artillery support. This increases their maneuverability but requires discretion in choosing objectives and limits the situations where they can defend.

Breaking the reliance on close air support or artillery increases operational and strategic options. It allows ground forces to reach areas the enemy will not expect. Therefore, the lack of firepower increases the requirement to reduce indicators. This means reducing logistical footprints and operating for long periods of time with what they can carry and find in the environment.

“Light infantry ethic exists and manifests itself in a specific attitude towards the environment, a freedom from fixed lines of communication, and a strong propensity for self-reliance.”⁹

In his study of light infantry, MAJ Scott McMichael, USA, examined four light infantry forces. One force examined was the Chindhit forces that operated in Burma and Malaya, which is a great example of a relatively modern light infantry force. These forces typically moved with only small arms and light mortars until they secured or seized a stronghold from which to fly in heavy mortars and howitzers. In order to accomplish this, the unit had to be highly trained at all levels and willing to suffer with minimal sustainment. Units with a light footprint and an ability to move long distances of “impassible terrain” increase the strategic options available to a commander.

Strategic mobility. Light infantry forces do not require a significant amount of strategic lift and can therefore respond to a crisis faster and with more flexibility than conventional infantry. This is supported by their tactical mindset and ability to adapt quickly to their environment. Light infantry is well suited for amphibious operations; thus, the Marine Corps must closely evaluate the equipment it is acquiring.

Though they may be slower, light infantry forces can move significant distances more discretely than conventional or mechanized infantry. During World War II, the 16th Brigade of the Chindhit forces made a



Marines pilot a SUAS during a training exercise in Norway, 2018. (Photo by Cpl Gloria Lepko.)

450-mile march over extremely rough jungle terrain in secret. This allowed them to conduct highly effective rear area operations against the Japanese in northern Burma.

On another occasion, the 5307th conducted a 65-mile movement through the Kuman Range, which varied from 6000 to 8000 feet in elevation. The terrain was considered impassible by the Japanese, so they neglected to put any outposts in this region.¹⁰ These examples display the advantages of light infantry even in modern combat. If a light force can move through “impassible terrain,” it can avoid enemy aerial observation or force the enemy to widen its scope of observation.

Embrace Light Infantry

The Marine Corps needs to fully identify its infantry as light infantry and take further steps to train, man, and equip the force appropriately. The plans for the new task organization and equipment for the rifle squad are a step in the right direction. The more capabilities pushed to the squad level will enable the squad to be self-reliant and capable.

As highlighted in *Scales on War*, by MG Robert Scales, USA(Ret), each squad needs self-contained capabilities to make it more survivable and lethal.¹¹ Small unmanned aerial systems (SUAS) are one key capability that must get to

every rifle squad. Currently, the number of systems available is inadequate. A rifle battalion must be able to dedicate a SUAS to each squad and section. Each squad leader needs a tablet. Currently, the Marine Corps is fielding the Marine Corps Common Handheld. This gives him the ability to communicate digitally to adjacent and supporting units such as air support and artillery. The squad leader can also have access to multiple types of imagery and down links from intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance platforms. The addition of an assistant squad leader will enable the squad to manage the extra technology with increased fluidity.

The infantry community must be aggressive in acquiring SUAS.

The infantry community must be aggressive in acquiring SUAS. This will be the critical factor on the future battlefield. The small unit leader who can locate the enemy and orient on the situation faster will win the decisive advantage. It logically follows that the more SUAS that are available for training, the more units will use it, and the

more refined and effective employment procedures will become. Infantry battalions must have the assets to develop the habit of action of always having something in the air for reconnaissance and force protection.

The investment in weapons systems is also a step in the right direction. The fielding of the M27 to every Marine reflects a light infantry mindset in that it keeps the small unit light, it is a more accurate weapon, and the addition of a suppressor makes the infantryman harder to find. Also, equipment such as the lightweight tripod for the M240 and lighter bipods for the M224 60mm mortar are outstanding improvements.

Regarding equipment, there are areas where the Marine Corps should continue to make progress in order to be an effective light infantry force. The Marine Corps should invest in alternate personal protective equipment options for Marines. Great progress has been made with the lightweight helmet and plate carrier. In the interest of achieving the concept of foot mobile operations in the MOC, investment should be made in more effective soft armor, as Marines will not be able to wear SAPPI plates in every climate. The Marine Corps must also invest in high-quality footwear that should be issued to Marines. The focus of the footwear should be durability and comfort for long foot marches.

We also need to supply Marines with superior survival gear. Each Marine should have a survival kit that allows him to effectively purify water—such as the hand pump systems—as well as forage and hunt for food in multiple environments. Not all of this must be provided by the larger Marine Corps. This issue should be a call to every small unit leader to ensure his Marines acquire or make survival kits and know how to use them. Battalions and companies can open purchase effective water purifiers as well. During field exercises, units should become accustomed to foraging and setting traps to catch food.

Lastly, the Marine Corps should continue looking at smaller utility vehicles to support the infantry vice the MRAP and MATV. For example, in 1976 during the Rhodesian Bush War, the Selous Scouts utilized universal motor device

vehicles that were modular and could be used in multiple variants from troop carriers to 81mm mortar variants. Various forms of armor could be added or taken off as well. Our current options of heavily armored vehicles restrict our flexibility and make our movement predictable.

The UTV is a great vehicle to achieve this end. The UTV should become more modular and have the ability to mount the 81mm mortar, the Saber system, and heavy machine guns. Currently, there are many restrictions that prevent Marines from innovating with the UTV. The divisions and MEFs should refine restrictions placed on units modifying the vehicles in the spirit of innovation and progress.

How to Train

The Marine Corps infantry community also needs to aggressively pursue advancements in training to complement changes in equipment. We must first examine our publications as they drive what is taught in our basic and advanced schools. For example, scouting and patrolling still contain outdated techniques. The counter-ambushing techniques mentioned are all reactionary and do not discuss how to avoid being ambushed. Also, the procedure for counter-ambushing the near ambush is still “to conduct an immediate assault into the ambush without order or signal.” This technique was developed during the French and Indian War when we were utilizing muskets with the intent to reach the ambusher before he reloaded. This may not be the best technique when your enemy has machine guns and grenades. A better example is given by H.J. Poole in *The Last Hundred Yards*, wherein he discusses methods for detecting ambushes, conducting hasty flanking attacks on an ambusher, and more logical options when caught in a near or far ambush.¹²

Our publications need to do a better job emphasizing other forms of maneuver than the flanking attack or envelopment. At the squad level, our Marines are mostly taught to conduct frontal attacks using a skirmish line. If we claim to conduct maneuver warfare pioneered by stormtrooper tactics, we should emphasize the attack by pen-

etration and infiltration. Units at every level should be taught to probe for the gaps. This can take many forms, but a light infantry force will rarely have more firepower than its enemy and must be efficient with it. Hence the need to be proficient in other forms of maneuver besides ones that require you to first overwhelm your enemy with firepower. The Marine rifle squad publication has good sections on attacks by infiltration which should be expanded upon and included in company- and battalion-level publications for incorporation into our training and education.

On the defensive side, we need to better explain how to conduct elastic defenses and defenses in depth, which involve giving ground and counterstriking your enemy as he attacks. We should also look at different ways to construct defensive positions from the way we dig fighting holes to our general thought process on deception in the defense. For example, a common technique in oriental defenses is to dig supplemental positions in front of the defense during the day and settle into primary positions at night. This way, the adversary is baited into attacking the supplemental positions in the primary engagement area. This is a significant difference to our western style of linear defenses, and it establishes an ambush mentality into defense construction.

Our training needs to also focus on creating the mindset required to conduct light infantry operations. The German stormtroopers, who are one of the pioneers of modern light infantry thinking, held that only troopers with high levels of initiative and ability to make independent decisions could serve in the storm infantry.¹³ This mindset is already present in our doctrine, *MCDP 1, Warfighting* (Washington, DC: HQMC, 1997). The infantry community needs to focus its efforts into tangibly producing Marines with these qualities and the toughness to endure the extremes of light infantry operations. We can draw again from the example of the Chindhit forces in World War II, who focused training on two themes of physical endurance and jungle craft.

Chindhit units were put under “ultra-high” levels of stress and physical demands. Required to move with 70-pound packs, little water, and light rations, they were trained to suffer and endure. With this mindset, they dominated both their environment and enemy. To win as light infantry, we must evaluate how we train to this standard.¹⁴ As Marines, we are talented enough to train past our limits effectively and create warriors unmatched on the battlefield.

Finally, we must train our units to be more self-reliant on the battlefield.



Light infantry should be the focus of infantry reorganization. (Photo by LCpl Colton Brownlee.)

Self-reliance means the ability to be cut off and surrounded and fight with the organic weapons of the unit. This is important on varying levels of a light infantry force. At the small unit level, squad-sized elements must possess the skills and equipment to conduct decentralized operations because of the operational requirements addressed previously.

Similarly, the platoon and company must better train to use their organic assets to attack or defend against the enemy. This may include attaching battalion-level assets with companies to increase their self-reliance. After-action reports from recent urban operations, such as the clearing of Mosul, highlight the effectiveness of squad-sized forces having anti-tank guided missiles and mortars directly attached with them because of the compartmentalized nature of the urban environment.

All leaders in the infantry, from NCO to officer, need to use critical thinking and realistic assessment to determine how well our TTP will work against our near-peer adversaries.

Logistically, we must train to suffer more and operate without creature comforts. We must ask ourselves: Do we really need four massive, visible tents for the battalion combat operations center? We must learn to operate with minimal logistical support, only enough communications as necessary, and as few vehicles as possible. It is easier to adjust to operating with more assets than realizing you have to strip yourself of assets to survive. With the proliferation of UAS and current adversary fires TTP, the large and very visible combat operations center is a death trap.

We ultimately get there by embracing alternative ways of teaching our Marines. How do you train Marines and leaders to be adaptable? At the base level, Marines must be placed into situations for which they have not been trained. Through struggle and failure, human beings not only learn more permanent

and meaningful lessons, but they learn to solve problems and adapt in general. For example, when teaching patrolling skills, do not make Marines sit through any classes on how to patrol. Simply task them to patrol and then attack them on their flank. Observe how they react and then have them debrief their own actions. You will be surprised how they come to a conclusion very similar to what is in the publication. But now they know why, which is the most important aspect.¹⁵

We need to change the way we think about training altogether. Our standards-based training only teaches Marines what to do in specific situations because we use the task, condition, and standard up front. Marines need to get to the point where they are only given the condition and must define their task and standard with the end state of winning in whichever situation they

are placed. This simple change in training methodology will create the best thinkers and adapters on the battlefield, which is a requirement for light infantry tactics.

None of this requires anything at the Service level that is not already being done. The Marine Corps infantry community needs to embrace the light infantry mindset. It needs to use the given tools, innovate, and demand more. All leaders in the infantry, from NCO to officer, need to use critical thinking and realistic assessment to determine how well our TTP will work against our near-peer adversaries. The light infantry mindset will be critical in finding creative solutions in tough, nearly unwinnable situations. Even in those “unwinnable” situations, the expectation is to win.

Notes

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3. William S. Lind, “Light Infantry Tactics,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: June 1990).
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8. *A Historical Perspective on Light Infantry*.
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11. MG Robert Scales, USA(Ret), *Scales on War*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2016).
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15. For good reference on adaptive leader methodology see GEN Martin E. Dempsey, USA(Ret), “Today’s Training and Education (Development) Revolution: The Future is Now!,” *The Land Warfare Papers*, (Arlington, VA: The Association of the United States Army, 2010).

