



# Gear vs Skills

by Capt Michael Hanson

Does expensive, top of the line gear increase the performance of Marines or can skilled Marines operate effectively with average equipment? There is a common sentiment in the Marine Corps that if we equip our Marines with the most expensive gear that this will increase their combat proficiency. It may help, but I am not convinced that investing in the best gear alone will have the intended effect. I argue we would be more well served to invest this money in better training processes to ensure our Marines possess the combat skills that gear enhances. We must ensure that they know how to hit what they are shooting at regardless of whether they have a bolt action 1903 Springfield or a fully automatic M27 IAR.

Some of the best infantry I ever saw was in Thailand, and they were equipped with left over junk from the Vietnam War. M16A1s with no rifling in the barrels, web belts, y-harnesses, and threadbare ALICE packs. They were humble but highly skilled and very effective. Likewise, I have seen a regular Marine Corps rifle squad with MARSOC plate carriers, high-cut helmets, peltor radio headsets, IARs, and suppressors for every Marine. They thought they were elite but performance wise were no different than most other rifle squads I had seen in my time as a Coyote with TTECG.

So, does the gear make the difference? I would say yes, gear can make a difference; for example, the RCO significantly increases the accuracy of a rifle and, thus, the lethality of the Marine employing it. But does the gear make *the* difference? To that, I would say no. *Gear* does not make the difference; *Marines* make the difference. Gear can assist Marines, but it is the Marine that is decisive on the battlefield. A few examples I have observed as the lead Coyote on the Squad Patrol Lane to illustrate my point: First, Marines are equipped with modern body armor, designed to protect them from enemy bullets. Despite this, they very often display complete ignorance in the effective use of their surrounding micro-terrain to make themselves a “hard target,” thereby making much of their personal protective equipment almost useless. Second, when engaged, often squads with peltors stop moving forward and begin a discussion with each other, each Marine having a seemingly endless debate, all enabled by the proliferation of communication devices. Why does someone not take charge? Third, the idea of equipping every squad with a drone to increase their situational awareness sounds good, but often enough I have seen these squads halt their patrol to launch the drone, then observe the squad leader get sucked into watching the drone feed, only to lose his tempo and initia-

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***Some of the most tactically proficient and physically durable infantry, like the Thai Marines and Rangers, are often far less well-equipped than their U.S. Marine and Special Forces counterparts.***  
(Photo by Sgt John Conroy 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne).)

tive and allow the opposing force to maneuver and close on his stationary squad. I am not claiming these instances occurred every time a squad was enabled with these types of equipment—but often enough for me to take notice.

During my time on the Urban Patrol Lane, I learned that the ability to conduct satellite patrolling effectively is an indicator of a great infantry squad. Good squads can satellite patrol well and bad squads cannot. Two things that enable effective satellite patrolling are good communication between fire teams and savvy fire team leaders because in satellite patrolling, the fire teams move independently of each other and the squad leader. A radio in every fire team allows the teams to spread out more and communicate with each other to move, change course, remain unpredictable, cover more ground, establish overwatch positions, react to, and maneuver on the enemy. This makes actions seamless and allows the squad to generate and maintain better tempo. Though radios in every fire team help the squad to better satellite patrol, they are not absolutely required. I have seen squads enabled with radios in each fire team satellite patrol

poorly, and I have seen squads with only one radio in the whole squad satellite patrol effectively by using hand and arm signals and other forms of implicit communication. I am not saying we should not enable our Marines with intra-squad radios, but I am saying that just giving them this gear does not make them effective. They need to know what to do with the gear. If we want to truly enable our Marines and increase their proficiency, we need to train them to be skilled in their practices, not simply throw gear at them.

The same could be said of land navigation. How well can our Marines navigate if their GPS gets jammed or spoofed? They should use the GPS as an aid to their land navigation skills, not rely solely on it to navigate overland and thus fail without it. One thing I have noticed that is an indisputable force multiplier are effective leaders. These Marines have the skills to leverage the combat power of their subordinates and multiply the value of their efforts. I remember on many occasions being able to recognize a squad leader development program (SLDP) graduate without being told he was an 0365. These Marines are head and shoulders above their peers and units with high numbers of 0365s are quantifiably better than those without them. The keys to their successes are superior leadership and combat skills. Imagine what we

could achieve if we not only invested in the abilities of our squad leaders like we do with the SLDP but did something similar with our team leaders as well. Again, good fire team leaders are what enable effective satellite patrolling.

You can give a Marine rifle squad all the best gear, and it may improve their proficiency somewhat. But giving the freshman team the best sports equipment and varsity jerseys does not solely make them ready to play against other varsity teams. The key difference is strong leadership and proficiency in common skills such as land navigation, communication, weapons employment, field craft, knowledge of the environment, etc., as well as the less tangible things like the *coup d'oeill*, cohesion, and unit discipline.

Given the choice, I rather go into the jungle with the proficient but poor Thai infantry squad and their junky equipment than the squad with all the “Gucci Gear” and insufficient skills to employ it properly.

