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## WHITHER THE LIGHT INFANTRY?

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**JCSP 43 DL**

***Exercise Solo Flight***

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EXERCISE *SOLO FLIGHT* – EXERCICE *SOLO FLIGHT*

**WHITHER THE LIGHT INFANTRY?**

Maj Jason A. Morische

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## WHITHER THE LIGHT INFANTRY?

The world of warfare is not what it once was. Decades of counter-insurgency (COIN) operations, and recent events in the Ukraine and Crimea have demonstrated the potential dilemma that ‘Hybrid Warfare’ poses to traditional armed forces. This contemporary operating environment (COE) is further complicated by the rise or resurgence of potential peer-level enemies around the world. With the increasing military might of potential adversaries, assumptions central to US, NATO and Western military doctrine no longer hold true.<sup>1</sup> This raises significant questions about our collective ability to deter or defeat technologically, and doctrinally superior forces in the future operating environment (FOE).

In light of the above, is there a place for light infantry forces within the COE and this perceived FOE? Some claim that given current trends, and the time compression and space expansion of the FOE, light forces will no longer have a place in the order of battle. Instead, increasingly potent and protected mechanized forces will be necessary.<sup>2</sup> Others however argue that because of the need for increased dispersal, the ability to target larger mechanized formations and their logistical echelons at greater distances, and the nature of complex environments, light infantry are not only relevant, but essential forces for states to maintain and build.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> These include: the availability of sufficient combat power to defeat an enemy, time and space for sequential operations, and domain and technological superiority. See: Major Jonathan W. Bott, *What's After Joint? Multi-Domain Operations as the Next Evolution in Warfare*, United States Army Command and General Staff College, Ft. Leavenworth, KS, 2017, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Rob Smith, “There is no longer a place for light role infantry in the British Army,” accessed at: <https://www.wavellroom.com/2018/01/18/there-is-no-longer-a-place-for-light-role-infantry-in-the-british-army/>

<sup>3</sup> Thomas E. Ricks, “In future ground war, light infantry will be alone and unsupported on the battlefield,” accessed at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/08/03/in-future-ground-war-light-infantry-will-be-alone-and-unsupported-on-the-battlefield-2/>

This paper will argue that light infantry will continue to be a critical capability in the COE and FOE to come. Beginning with an examination of both the COE and FOE it will be possible to identify the key capabilities required of forces as well as the constraints of these OEs. It will then be necessary to assess what light infantry is, and distinguish it from dismounted infantry. Ultimately, with a better understanding of the OEs and light infantry capabilities it will be shown that, although not the only capability required, light infantry provides effective forces critical to success. *In obiter*, this paper will outline more recent Canadian efforts to generate light forces and consider if they are appropriate given the nature of the OEs provided.

### **The Contemporary Operating Environment (COE)**

*In the 21<sup>st</sup> century we have seen a tendency towards blurring the lines between the states of war and peace. Wars are no longer declared and, having begun, proceed according to an unfamiliar template.*

General Valery Gerasimov, Russian CGS

Today, warfare is no longer exclusively the province of states with organized, uniformed armed forces. Warfare has changed from regular to irregular as states, and non-state forces have clashed with greater frequency. As a result of these changes classic theories of warfare are becoming less and less applicable, and more importantly, armed forces organized to combat traditional threats are becoming less effective than in the past.<sup>4</sup> The growth of insurgencies and the counter-insurgent campaigns against them have driven significant shifts in thinking and structure of many Western forces.<sup>5</sup> Within this context, armed forces have had to adopt new

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<sup>4</sup> Sebastien L.v. Gorka, 'The Age of Irregular Warfare: So What?' *Joint Force Quarterly*, no. 58 (3rd Quarter 2010), p. 36.

<sup>5</sup> Sir Lawrence Freedman, 'Regular and Irregular War,' *Strategic Datalink*, no. 1 (August 2008), p. 1.

strategies, tactics and procedure to combat irregular forces, and balance the impact of a growing intersection of political, cultural, economic and military pressures on any operation.<sup>6</sup>

More recent events in the Ukraine and Crimea have taken these changes one step further where we have witnessed a peer-level potential adversary adopt a blend of regular and irregular strategies and capabilities in conflict. Though there is debate about whether ‘Hybrid Warfare’ is really a Russian term, it has proven to be a useful, though broad, concept to explain the complex problem Western armed forces and states now face.<sup>7</sup> Hybrid warfare ‘...is conflict in which states or non-state actors exploit all modes of war simultaneously by using advanced weapons, irregular tactics, terrorism and disruptive technologies or criminal activity to destabilize and existing order.’ Where an enemy will attack on multiple fronts with a variety of means traditional means of defending against them will continue to prove largely ineffective as recent history has shown.<sup>8</sup>

Within this evolving COE there is a need for a variety of armed force structures. In addition to those large-scale, conventional forces capable of meeting traditional threats on the high-intensity end of the spectrum, there are those which must be capable of operating on a continuum from low- to mid-level intensity considered above. These forces must be able to meet newer challenges like those posed by hybrid warfare, in ways curiously well described by T. E. Lawrence in his discussion of insurgent forces. Of particular note, given the variety of potential enemies and threats, a force must be able to: work in small numbers and not present a large target (dispersed and scalable to the threat); be able to operate with speed, endurance and

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<sup>6</sup> Sebastien L.v. Gorka, *Ibid*, p. 36.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of Russian strategy see: Andrew J. Duncan, ‘Hybrid War or Dirty Tricks? The Gerasimov Debate and Russia’s response to the Contemporary Operating Environment,’ *Canadian Military Journal*, Vol 17, No. 3 (2017).

<sup>8</sup> Robert Wilkie, ‘Hybrid Warfare: Something Old, Not Something New,’ *Air and Space Power Journal* XXIII, no. 4 (Winter 2009), p. 14 – 15.

logistical freedom (flexibility); be oriented to precision offensive action; and have a significant freedom of action (initiative) to be successful.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Future Operating Environment (FOE)**

*Understanding future warfare is the most important responsibility of those who must defend a nation from future enemies!*

*MGen Perry M Smith (Retd), Chief Planner, USAF*

If the COE wasn't complex enough already, the pace of military technological advancements amongst competitor states threatens to make for an even more challenging future. The proliferation of these technologies to other actors and the narrowing gap of peer-level armed forces capabilities in all areas only exacerbates the need for robust forces in the FOE to respond across a spectrum of threats.<sup>10</sup>

An examination of defence research suggests that should these trends continue, land warfare will likely evolve in the following ways:

- Operations will shift from linear to nonlinear;
- Formations will operate much more dispersed;
- Operations will be conducted at a much higher tempo, leading to greater reliance on speed of mobilization and deployment, and of combat operations themselves;

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<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the six principles for success of an insurgency and the characteristics of an insurgent force see: James Schneider, 'T.E. Lawrence and the Mind of an Insurgent.' *Army Magazine*, Vol. 55, no. 7, July (2005), p. 36.

<sup>10</sup> Recent modernization programs in Russia and China across all services in terms of technology and scale are of particular concern. Further, the increasing capabilities of both of these states in cyber, informational and space is expected to eclipse the Western powers within two decades. Further gains by Iran and North Korea, particularly in ballistic missile and nuclear technologies pose significant threats to regional stability as well as external interests and relations with states like Israel and South Korea.

- Advanced information technologies will allow ground forces to form networks, enabling them to violate the principle of mass to better protect themselves by dispersion, while losing little of their ability to coordinate or mass combat capability;
- Although close combat will remain a key element in land warfare, advanced information capabilities and munitions will enable ground forces to conduct decisive engagements at far greater ranges than has historically been the case;
- Adversaries that cannot compete effectively in open battle will gravitate toward combat in complex terrain (urban areas in particular);
- Operations will be much more dependent on maritime and air forces for their success than has been the case—in short, land warfare will become even more of a joint endeavor than it is today; and
- The spectrum of land warfare will become blurred, with various forms of warfare merging, requiring unprecedented levels of flexibility from land forces.<sup>11</sup>

US military theorists at Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) have begun the search for new concepts to meet the increased challenges of facing peer military forces both prior to and in war. One leading candidate is Multi-Domain Battle (MDB). This ‘...defines the “simultaneous and dynamic execution of integrated operations across all domains” as a means toward restoring the Joint Force’s freedom of action and comparative military advantage. MDB “evolves the combined arms methodology” by incorporating the entirety of the Joint Force and

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<sup>11</sup> Andrew F. Krepinevich, *Transforming the Legions: The Army and the Future of Land Warfare*, The Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, Washington D.C., 2004, p. 32.

other partners to act across “all [physical and abstract] domains ... the electromagnetic spectrum [EMS], the information environment, and the cognitive dimension of warfare.”<sup>12</sup>

While MDB necessarily incorporates modernization and reorganization of all services, it primarily seeks to rationalize the employment of future ground forces.<sup>13</sup> Through TRADOC several key requirements are highlighted that impact upon any future land force. These are: calibrating force posture to meet hybrid to high-intensity threats, resilience, converging capabilities, and multi-domain capabilities across an extended battlespace.<sup>14</sup> Critical to all of this, is the ability to operate in a dispersed manner, converging where necessary ‘...to seize, retain and exploit the initiative and achieve military objectives.’<sup>15</sup> All of these will require not just new equipment but new training and new forces structure to achieve the full range of capabilities to defeat a range of enemies.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to all of these considerations is the fact that the rest of the world outside of armed forces continues towards greater mobility/migration and urbanization. While other significant changes are required as noted above, the physical battlespace will tend towards littoral and urban spaces which each carry their own sets of issues. The particular problem of the

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<sup>12</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel Matthew W. Brown, *Toward Multi-Domain Battle: Combined Arms Precedents to Inform today's Joint Force*, National Defence University, Joint Forces Staff College, 21 April 2017, p. 2. For a full explanation of MDB see: U.S. Army-Marine Corps *White Paper. Multi-Domain Battle: Combined Arms Operations for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century 2025 - 2040, DRAFT v. 1.0*. Army Capabilities Integration Center, Capability Development and Learning Directorate, Joint and Army Concepts Division and Marine Corps Combat Development Command, Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory, Futures Directorate, October 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Shmuel Shmuel, ‘Multi-Domain Battle: AirLand Battle, Once More, with Feeling’, 20 June 2017, accessed at <https://warontherocks.com/2017/06/multi-domain-battle-airland-battle-once-more-with-feeling/>, p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> U.S. Army Marine Corps, *Ibid*, p. 2 and 31 – 42.

<sup>15</sup> Shmuel Shmuel, *Ibid*, p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> Kelly McCoy, *The Road to Multi-Domain Battle: An Origin Story*, 27 October 2017, accessed at <https://mwi.usma.edu/road-multi-domain-battle-origin-story/>, p. 3.

‘Mega-City’ with its socio-economic and political impacts is critical to acknowledge when designing force capabilities.<sup>17</sup>

### **Light Infantry**

*I love the infantry because they are the underdogs. They are the mud-rain-frost-and-wind boys. They have no comforts, and they even learn to live without the necessities. And in the end they are the guys that wars can't be won without.*

*Ernie Pyle, US WWII War Correspondent, Killed at Okinawa*

Light infantry (LI) is a unique and potentially powerful land force capability that has received proper attention only during periods of doctrinal revolution, and to many is perfectly misunderstood. It is important that now, on the cusp of such significant changes in the world of warfare, that the distilled nature of LI be explored briefly before determining how it could, or should, be maintained in the order of battle of Western armies.

It is critical to highlight the fact that LI is not simply infantry without vehicles, nor is it a general-purpose force to be employed when short on convention (mechanized or motorized) infantry.<sup>18</sup> LI is both unique and distinct (when properly trained and equipped) because of its: freedom from logistical lines, ability to use terrain (particularly that which is complex), self-reliance, versatility, ability to improvise and resourcefulness.<sup>19</sup> LI requires personnel who meet higher physical and professional standards (though not quite to the level of SOF or SF) and are able to carry-out a higher tempo of training and maintain higher standards of professional skills in battlecraft, fieldcraft, weapons handling, specialty skills (demolitions, communications, JTAC,

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<sup>17</sup> Michael Evans, ‘Future war in cities: Urbanization’s challenge to strategic studies in the 21st century,’ *International Review of the Red Cross* 98, Iss. 1, (2016), p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> For a detailed historical account of light infantry: Scott R. McMichael, *A Historical Perspective on Light Infantry*, U.S. Army CGSC Research Survey No. 6, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 1987, p. 232. See also Appendix A for differences between LI and conventional infantry based on the case studies of this work.

<sup>19</sup> Scott R. McMichael, *Ibid*, pp. 219 – 220.

first aid etc) as well as small unit tactics.<sup>20</sup> Examples of this would be the US 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division, IDF Golani Brigade or the British Parachute Regiment.<sup>21</sup> With these basic building blocks, LI places a premium on junior leaders who are able to operate independently, and with more flexibility than conventional infantry units. Initiative is critical.

As a result, LI is best suited for offensive operations and to work in cooperation with SOF/SF units as well as irregular forces. Keys to LI operations are: speed, shock and surprise. Where LI truly impresses is in low- to mid-intensity conflicts which require greater abilities to operate with OGDs and NGOs in a JIMP environment particularly in close contact with civilian populations.<sup>22</sup> Consider coalition forces which attempted this work in Afghanistan, albeit with limited training.<sup>23</sup> Finally because of its reliance on man-portable weapons systems and integration with higher support fires, LI is ideal for use in complex terrain and to adjust to different levels or types of threats.<sup>24</sup> While LI can be combined with conventional forces, or make use of technology (ie helicopters trucks or weapons systems) these must be done with care such that LI is not made to fit other organizations, but that others employ LI to maximize the capabilities that such independent forces bring to the battle.

Because of these characteristics, LI are ideally suited to operate in dispersed smaller sized groups from battalion to squad/section. This affords more rapid deployment as well as the ability to operate for periods in all-weather and night operations.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Scott R. McMichael, *Ibid*, p. 22 and 228.

<sup>21</sup> Scott R. McMichael, *Ibid*, p. 221.

<sup>22</sup> Scott R. McMichael, *Ibid*, p. 232.

<sup>23</sup> Questions of strategic success in Afghanistan are beyond this paper, however tactical successes of coalition infantry in a variety of roles and circumstances are significant.

<sup>24</sup> Major Robert S. Burrell, *Marine Raider Battalions: A Case Study in Distributed Operations*, Naval War College, Newport R.I., 2010, pp. 4 – 8; and Gary G. Lambert and Stanley E. Shaneyfelt, *Review of Light Infantry Doctrine*, U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, Alexandria VA., 1989, p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> Gary G. Lambert and Stanley E. Shaneyfelt, *Ibid*, pp. 1 – 3.

If one accepts the above as general characteristics of LI, and the types of operations that it is capable of conducting, the ultimate question is, does LI have a place within the COE or FOE? Or as some have claimed should it be cast into history in favour of other capabilities?

### **The Value of Light Infantry in the COE and FOE**

Given the foregoing discussion of the requirements of both OEs and the general characteristics of LI, does LI provide an effective capability to an armed force? Within the spectrum of threats discussed, one measure of effectiveness is the ability to generate combat power as it is how leaders combine effects against an enemy that will contribute to their defeat.<sup>26</sup> Combat power is comprised of four key components: firepower, maneuver, protection and leadership.

With respect to firepower, increases in technology have increased the lethality, range and accuracy of many weapons systems including man-portable ones.<sup>27</sup> Modern anti-tank, and anti-aircraft systems (such as Javelin and Stinger systems) afford a smaller force the ability to reach greater distances and create greater effects with organic fires. Increased communications also permit a greater variety of inorganic fires to be leveraged by these same smaller units.<sup>28</sup> With increased standards for marksmanship, weapons-handling across systems, and training in small unit tactics a smaller LI force is capable of increased firepower effects without relying on massing as is traditionally required.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> For a doctrinal discussion of combat power see: Major Mark Van Drie, *A Light Infantry Division for Airland Battle – Future*, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 1990, pp. 4 – 5.

<sup>27</sup> Major Mark Van Drie, *Ibid*, p. 16.

<sup>28</sup> Major Mark Van Drie, *Ibid*, p. 32.

<sup>29</sup> Major Mark Van Drie, *Ibid*, p. 17.

There are several examples that bear out the value of LI which will hold true for future OEs. In 2006 small units of *Hezbollah* forces were able to put modern anti-tank systems (in addition to dispersed deployments in complex terrain) to use in order to blunt IDF advances into southern Lebanon and force significant changes in the Israeli campaign and inflicting casualties and losses to armoured and mechanized forces at critical stages.<sup>30</sup> In another example, the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) proved that it was able to provide similar firepower (also utilizing its ability to operate in complex terrain) against U.S. forces through the use of close-in battle, as well as leveraging higher fires when required.<sup>31</sup>

Maneuver is commonly a key attribute of mechanized and armoured forces, however LI are equally capable of this particularly in complex terrain. Given the composition of LI forces, such as the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division, which can mobilize and deploy within 48 hours, and be complete within seven days or less, the speed of mobilization and deployment provides strategic maneuver. The Parachute Regiment during the Falklands provides another key operational example through their deployment across the Atlantic in 1982. Operating in a dispersed manner, and across complex terrain (consider the Chindits in Malaya, or the Paras and Royal Marines in the Falklands) LI provides a combat capability which conventional forces either require too much time to meet, or simply cannot provide given their equipment and logistical requirements. Finally, with the ability to operate more regularly at night, and in all weather conditions LI forces can combine their maneuver with firepower for the types of precision offensive operations using speed, surprise and shock action noted above as a requirement for both OEs.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> For a detailed analysis of the 2006 campaign see: Major Gregory Donahue, *The 2006 Hezbollah-Israeli War: Israel's Grenada*, United States Marine Corps Command and Staff College Marine Corps University, Quantico VA, 2013, pp. 10 – 14.

<sup>31</sup> Major Mark Van Drie, *Ibid*, p. 20.

<sup>32</sup> Consider again the Parachute Regiment and Royal Marines lengthy marches to conduct night time attacks on Argentine positions across the Falklands, see: Major Mark Van Drie, *Ibid*, p. 29; and Major Andrew M.

Given the nature of modern fires, protection comes from the dispersion that LI forces can achieve while maintaining their firepower and maneuver. Like the Lawrence's irregular forces in the Middle East against the Turkish forces, through the ability to disperse and deny targets to the enemy, LI units maintain increased protection. Combined with training in fieldcraft, and the ability to better use complex terrain, LI maintains its ability to fight for longer periods with relatively fewer resources, even against a larger force.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, leadership at the lowest levels coupled with training and increased tolerance of initiative promoted by LI combines the above three criteria, and generates an increased willingness and ability to fight. Historical examples of the Chindits section- and platoon-level patrols operating for lengthy periods in jungle environments while still able to conduct offensive operations are a case in point.<sup>34</sup>

While these examples and metrics speak to one type of threat in both OEs, the use of infantry forces by NATO in Afghanistan serves to speak to COIN-type operations, which address a wider range of threats. The need for forces to work in a flexible, scaled, coordinated and joint environment was demonstrated in an increasingly competent fashion throughout the campaign by infantry units. The benefit of having true LI units to counter the type of irregular tactics, criminal activity, and need for JIMP-type campaigns becomes clear when one considers the difficulty that more conventional forces had when tied to their vehicles, or hampered by a lack of training

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Pullan, *The British Infantry in the Falklands Conflict: Lessons of the Light Infantry in 1982 and Their Relevance to the British Army at the Turn of the Century*, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 1999, pp 76 – 86.

<sup>33</sup> Major Mark Van Drie, *Ibid*, p. 28.

<sup>34</sup> Major Mark Van Drie, *Ibid*, p. 24.

which prevented them from leveraging opportunities with the local population, government or NGOs.<sup>35</sup>

### **The Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) on Light Infantry**

*The Army needs to ensure that it is able to generate light infantry battalion groups that have adequate firepower, mobility and protection without making them too heavy to meet the demands of their likely special operational environments.*

*MGen Caron, A/CLS, Sep 04*

In 2015 the Commander of the Canadian Army mandated that an LI capability be generated, recognizing that the current Light Infantry Battalions (LIBs) could not provide the full suite of force options for light forces.<sup>36</sup> The difficulty with the mandate was that the army had no light infantry doctrine or TTPs, and lacked the necessary equipment, weapons and manpower.<sup>37</sup> Several key weapons systems are currently also lacking in the CAF inventory, particularly man-portable, modern anti-armour and anti-air systems.<sup>38</sup> However, all is not lost in that the army recognizes the need for this capability, and has accepted that LI is not infantry without vehicles.<sup>39</sup> This has inspired a more fundamental examination of the force capability required for the future and a careful consideration of the structure necessary to meet Canadian security interests. The preliminary draft proposal is due later in 2018, puts the CAF ahead of some allies in terms of planning for the future. Time will tell if resources will be allocated to realize a true LI capability.

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<sup>35</sup> For a discussion of the possible COIN-specialization of light infantry see: Major Jean Vachon, 'The Future of Light Forces,' *Canadian Army Journal*, Vol. 15, no. 1, 2013, pp. 59 – 62.

<sup>36</sup> Captain Richard Masson, 'Light Forces,' 22 Oct 2017, accessed at: <https://canadianarmytoday.com/light-forces/>

<sup>37</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel Dave Galea, 'A Light Force Capability for the Army,' *Canadian Army Journal*, Vol. 8, no. 2, 2005, p. 16.

<sup>38</sup> Alain Cohen and Julien Chaput-Lemay, 'Up the Creek Without a Paddle,' *Canadian Military Journal*, Vol. 17, no. 2, 2017, pp. 55 – 56.

<sup>39</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel Dave Galea, *Ibid*, p. 14.

## **Conclusion**

Through historical examples like the Falklands, South Lebanon 2006 or even the Chindits in Malaya, and considering the complex nature of the OEs and traits of LI together, the necessity and need for an LI capability on the battlefields of today and tomorrow is clear. Being able to maintain combat power in ways, and in environments, where conventional forces cannot, and being able to scale forces to meet a wider variety of threats underscores this conclusion. While there is no doubt that other capabilities, such as armoured and mechanized forces are required, LI offers a unique and potent force capable of mitigating a variety of risks and threats on the current or future battlefields that other types of forces are unable to manage.

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