The Foot Soldier's Load

Learning from the Past

It seems to me that the Army should have learned more from the past. The author is an old soldier who spent a total of three years in infantry combat in two wars. I regard S.L.A. Marshall as one of my mentors, for I studied his writings assiduously as a junior officer —his magisterial Soldier's Load and the Mobility of the Nation and Men Against Fire.[1] I learned to pay close attention to what foot soldiers were expected to carry into battle, and came to believe that heavy loads decrease both mental and physical mobility. Moreover, the soldier's load is determined chiefly by his chain of command:

> **…generals in all ages have been no respecters of the limitations of the human animal, either in or out of combat. In this they have been consistent, from Marcus Aurelius down to Marshal Montgomery…**

Marshall accepted historical analyses that concluded that the Roman Legionnaire carried approximately 60 pounds on the road, 44 pounds approaching a battlefield, and 33 pounds in actual combat. But, he wrote:

> **We should at least add the footnote that 2,000 years after the Legion, the American Army dropped men from Higgins boats and onto the rough deep sands of Normandy carrying more than eighty pounds. The French soldier at the time of the Crimean War carried an equipment of seventy-two pounds. The British Redcoats carried eighty pounds when they stormed our Bunker Hill. At Waterloo British infantrymen carried sixty to seventy pounds, the French about fifty-five. U.S. infantry carried weights comparable to these during World War I.**

[1] Marshall, S.L.A. The Soldier's Load and the Mobility of the Nation. The Combat Forces Press, Washington, DC, 1950. Men Against Fire. William Morrow, New York, 1947. Marshall was an historian, a prolific writer (46 entries in the LoC catalogue), and an eye-witness to World War I in France, to War II in both the Pacific and European Theaters, to Korea, and to Vietnam. I am well aware that certain of his precepts have been critically challenged, but such of these as I put into practice proved sound to my satisfaction. Cf. Russell W. Glenn's Introduction in the U. Oklahoma Press edition of Men Against Fire, published in 2000.

> **Conditioning soldiers to march with the heavy pack (about sixty pounds) was a training requirement. In combat more rations and munitions were added and very little of the training load was eliminated, at least by official order.**

Marshall discounted the impact of mechanization, and quarreled with Patton's assertion that, given America's ability to motorize its forces, no soldier serving under its flag should be expected to walk until he actually enters combat. Marshall pointed out that:

> **It is conspicuous that what the machine has failed to do up to the present moment [1947] is to decrease by a single pound the weight the individual has to carry in war. He is still as heavily burdened as the soldier of 1000 years BC… Rare indeed is the high commander who will fight consistently and well effectively for the opposite. In fact, it is chiefly the high commanders who have laid this curse on the back of the fighting man right down through the ages. The second lieutenants have usually known better.**

In Korea in 1952, thus influenced by Marshall, the author, then a lieutenant and rifle platoon leader, resisted requiring his troops to wear the clumsy armored vests of that day. That spring I was a patient in the Army's hospital in Tokyo, recovering from multiple wounds received in an exchange of hand grenades with an entrenched Chinese infantryman near Chorwon, Korea. One day I received an invitation to visit the residence of a West Point classmate's father, Vice Admiral C. Turner Joy, USN, who was Commander, Naval Forces Far East, and the Senior United Nations Delegate to the Korean Armistice negotiations. Admiral Joy's quarters, a palatial Japanese estate on the edge of Tokyo, were a delight to my eyes, and his warm hospitality was most welcome after weeks of tedium in a hospital ward. He probed me on details of operations at the front, and I recall, particularly vividly, a sharp exchange we had on the subject of body armor. He inquired whether my rifle company was so equipped, and I replied that some armored vests were available. But, I said, I had never worn one, especially forward of the MLR (main line of resistance), because the vest's weight and bulk impeded tactical agility. The Admiral responded with a stern lecture on the nature of the Korean conflict, which he saw as a long clash of wills in which our foes calculated that

American impatience with ever-lengthening U.S. casualty lists would cause our political leaders to meet the terms laid down by North Korea and China. “Every time an armored vest keeps an soldier or Marine alive,” the Admiral said, ”our position at Panmunjom is strengthened; every KIA reported in the American press emboldens our enemies and weakens our stance. If I were General Ridgway I would order that all troops, without exception, would wear armor whenever in range of enemy guns.” I returned to the front in Korea my convictions somewhat tempered. Toward the end of my “tour,” when I was under Chinese guns at Pork Chop Hill and Old Baldy, I had come around to the Admiral’s view.

I was selected to become a brigadier general in 1971, while I was in Vietnam, in command of 1st Brigade of the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile), with headquarters near Hue. Resolved to avoid the mistakes of predecessors, I set out to reduce combat loads. I was well prepared by experience to do so, for in 1966 I had commanded 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry, 1st Infantry Division, truly light infantry who stalked the jungles north of Saigon seeking the enemy, carrying around their necks a khaki sweat towel and C rations in socks, and wearing suspenders for a “butt pack”, rifle ammo, a poncho, canteen, and entrenching tool. Hand grenades and claymores were distributed within each squad. The unit carried its machine gun ammunition in the issued metal boxes, not draped on soldiers, for it knew well that ammo thus abused usually led to a weapon stoppage just when automatic fire was most needed. Typically they searched by day, were resupplied by air in the late afternoon, and, having thereby informed the enemy of their location, either executed a night march to a new location, or dug a night defensive position (NDP). But they could also move stealthily for days without re-supply, depending in an emergency on aerially delivered reinforcement and resupply. They were also well versed in airmobile maneuver, but it was a rare day when more than one light and one medium helicopter were available to support the whole battalion.

My experience with 1-26 Inf was in vivid contrast to practices I found in my three infantry battalions in 1971. As a brigade commander in an airmobile division, I had at my disposal virtually unlimited numbers of

light, medium, and heavy helicopters. The brigade's assigned area of operations was studded with well-fortified fire bases with lighted landing pads and refueling facilities, and peppered with LZs cut into the jungle. Patrolling missions were largely defensive, short one or two-day forays from a fire base designed to forestall surprise attack. Yet for such patrols infantry soldiers were accustomed to being flown into the jungle festooned with ordnance and bearing voluminous rucksacks. They often had hot meals delivered to them by air, complete with paper plates and plastic utensils. One battalion even occasionally served a company hot breakfast, then had it move to another LZ for a hot supper.

As soon as I took command, I sought to learn what the terrain west of Hue was like by accompanying the brigade's reconnaissance platoon on a patrol at the north end of the Ashau Valley. The scouts were to land on a ridge, and then traverse its southern slopes to the valley floor. The insertion was well executed, but the platoon's exit from the LZ somewhat lackadaisical. I was amazed at the American detritus not only around the LZ, but also along the entire route: not just cartridge brass, but also two full M-16 clips; not just cigarette residue and candy wrappers, but discarded insect repellant, cans of soda and shaving cream, and bottles of condiments and hair tonic; not just bloody bandages, but an unopened first aid packet. The patrol had apparently been assigned a route that was well-traveled, and certainly well-marked for the enemy. My "scouts" —who, by doctrine, were supposed to evade contact— smoked and chattered freely as we moved. They wore large backpacks, and were armed to the teeth, carrying enough ammunition for a rifle platoon — probably a reasonable policy if all their scouting was similarly advertised and sign-posted.

That determined to change the brigade's habits. One of our infantry battalions was preparing to load out for an airmobile operation from one of the division's major airfields. I postponed the unit's departure, and descended on the unit with a large contingent from the Division's Inspector General, instructed to require a full weighing and display of each man's impedimenta. The results were daunting: the average total weight

approached 100 pounds per man. One grizzled IG Sergeant said it well: “The bigger the ruck, the bigger the appetite. Soldiers ‘ll invent ways to fill any pack to the max.”

The inspectors put into escrow for each trooper’s return “comfort items” like books, magazines, pictures, cameras, commercial-band radios, cigarettes and candy, Louisiana hot sauce, canned delicacies, shaving lotion, hair tonic and the like. Over the weeks that followed, indignant letters home precipitated a number of Congressional inquiries. But that heat was trivial compared with the furor over “private boxes.” It had apparently been customary to carry all machine gun belts on person, and to distribute the empty metal ammo cans to any soldier who wanted one in his rucksack as a water-proof depository for letters and photos from home, or —as inspection revealed— marijuana or more potent drug paraphernalia. The troops seemed to have developed a consensus that this box was “off limits” to any NCO or officer (the unit’s NCOs and officers denied that any such arrangement existed, and given the swirl of replacements, may even have been ignorant of the notion). In any event, the weigh-in convinced me to launch a serious effort, sternly enforced, to change mores in the 1st Brigade, and to demand of my battalion commanders that they field units with austere impedimenta for operations outside a fire base. Use of the issue rucksack was thereafter largely confined to moves between the brigade’s rear area and a forward fire base.

I ordered more offensive patrols beyond my AOR into the Ashau Valley and out to the Laos border. I directed that deception be planned for all airmobile operations, particularly for combat insertions and for logistic functions. I stipulated that one battalion would patrol only with the small “butt pack,” per the 1-26 Inf practice. Another was allowed both a butt pack and a stripped shoulder pack. In the third battalion, the battalion commander could permit each company commander to prescribe which alternative load configuration to use, depending on his mission. After experience with all three schema, I made the last cited the Brigade SOP. Re-supply timing varied as a function of allowed soldier load: the less allowance for on-

person weight carriage, the shorter the re-supply interval. But the latter was usually once per day, and the maximum, five days.

In my judgment, the changes I made were effective; I can offer as Measures of Effectiveness no irrefutable facts or figures, but I can offer four possibly corroborative "war stories."

Hadley's Patrol

The first is an account by a professional journalist who accompanied a patrol from my brigade toward the end of 1970, quoted from an article published the following summer that won a Pulitzer Prize for its author, Arthur T. Hadley. Hadley had been lieutenant infantry platoon leader, in France, 1944, and subsequently a captain in a frontline loudspeaker/leaflet unit in Holland and Germany, attached to an infantry regiment. As a reporter he made three trips to Vietnam, during the last of which he visited infantry units countrywide, including my brigade. He told me that on his trip he had seen the U.S. Army both at its worst, and at its best. He told me that he wanted to mingle with soldiers performing a mission, because he thought he could discern the best from the others. He remarked that, "a combat unit is a closed world, tighter than any Mafia [but] beware of the sullen unit with dirty weapons, and too heavy packs…Only the most outstanding units insist on light packs." I sent Arthur T. Hadley to 2nd Bn, 502d Inf, and here is what he wrote about his experience with a company of that unit:[2]

> **The patrol halts deep in the jungle. I grab a tree root to keep from sliding farther down the muddy hill and sit panting. In the 35 hours I have been with this unit, no one has spoken above a whisper. The man in front of me, the only one I can see, holds up three fingers. I turn and hold up three fingers to the man behind. In response to some code I do not know, the unit silently rearranges itself, the machine gunner and his assistant slither forward past me, the grenade launcher climbs back up the trail toward the rear. The jungle is unbelievably thick, the basic plant being a squat, saw-toothed palm with narrow leaves. Old Vietnamese hands say the jungle is less passable now since defoliation. Destruction of the**

[2] Hadley, A.T. "Goodbye to the Blind Slash Dead Kid's Hooch." PLAYBOY. Vol. 18, No. 8-Aug 1971. P 112ff.

top cover has let more sunlight through to the plants below.

This is the most professional unit I will visit in Vietnam. The men's packs are checked for extra weight. No one carries soda pop off the landing zone, because the "pish" of a soda being opened makes too much noise at night. They do not inflate their air mattresses or cut branches to make poncho tents for the same reason. They never bunch. Their weapons and ammunition are spotless. After a wait of about ten minutes, the man in front of me points at me and beckons. Using handholds, I slide the last 30 yards down the hill toward the invisible green jungle river. At the edge of the riverbed, suddenly feeling naked in a patch of sunlight, I fetch up against the captain. He is 24 years old, on his second tour. He has had 20 months of combat. His first tour he spent as an advisor to a South Vietnamese ranger company. During the first half of this tour he led long-range patrols into North Vietnam.

Pulling a leech off the back or my neck, he kneels down beside me and, pointing up the trail along the river-bank, explains in a slow whisper: "What I've found here is this trail made by between ten and twenty men. You can tell from the way the leaves look, it's between five and ten days old. We've been along it about a hundred yards and found a tin of sardines, a package of Kools and an almost empty bottle of Vitalis. Kools are the favorite cigarette of the NVA. Sardines are used by both the NVA and the ARVN. But this can had a little bit of oil left round the edge and the NVA usually leave a can really clean. Finally, there's the Vitalis. I've never known the NVA to carry that; but the ARVN use it all the time. We're right on the edge of an ARVN AO. What I judge we've got here is an old trail where a South Vietnamese patrol crossed into my area to work up the stream a ways. We'll go downstream."

Later we break for lunch. The radio operator, a rifleman, and I cook our C rations over little bite-size pieces of C4 explosive. The rifleman's C ration is ham and lima beans, a ration the Army stopped making in 1967. "Old stuff," he whispers. A monkey rustling in a tree gives us a case of the ass for a moment, then the jungle is quiet again, no one visible but ourselves and the outline of the man before and the man behind. In whispers still, we talk. About the war, dope, the black-white problem.

"We don't have any problem here; it's back in the rear," says the radio operator. "We're all buddies here and we swear we'll never think those things about blacks again. But back in the world we start up the same things."

The rifleman shakes his head. "We'll remember something."

I remark that the unit is so professional they must have seen a lot of combat. Both men think about this. Then the radio operator, who has only five days to go and has seen a lot of combat, says no. The two men run through the company. Seventy percent have never heard a shot fired in anger.

"We're lucky to have this captain," whispers the rifleman. "He's cool to the max. We may get blown away, but we won't get blown away fucking up."

A few miles away, I visit another company [not of 1st Brigade]. The officers and men had gotten drunk the night before and staged a fake mortar attack on themselves to see the helicopters shoot and maybe pick up a few Bronze Stars.

You can see any face of Vietnam you want.

Gorman's Road

The second account has also been documented, but I have seen the record in classified form only. My memory of what happened, however, is probably accurate. The patrolling of 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile) detected what appeared to be preparation for an offensive against Hue. Discovery of stockpiles of uniforms and munitions within the Brigade's Area of Responsibility suggested a route of advance, and further patrolling found a well-constructed road running southwest-northeast, seemingly from south of the Ashau Valley toward Hue. The roadbed was ditched, metalled, and concealed by interlacing the branches of overarching trees, certainly capable of sustaining traffic by heavy vehicles, including tanks. 1st

Brigade patrols plotted segments of what came to be known within the intelligence community as "Gorman's Road." At the request of higher headquarters, I moved 155mm artillery to peaks overlooking a forward segment of the road, and blew away its camouflage to enable imagery mensuration and other analyses. I was visited by COMUSMACV at the gun positions. General Abrams asked me what I thought the road portended. I told him about the caches, then opined that the road was built to support an attack on Hue by a large force, probably partially mechanized, planned as part of an offensive scheduled for Tet 1972 (the following Jan-Feb). He replied that I was among the few Americans who understood that the *modus operandi* of the North Vietnamese Army was exactly the inverse of that of the U.S. Army: we would launch an offensive leading with combat units, followed by combat support and combat service support units, and ending with provisions for government. The enemy, however, already had a shadow government in Hue, gathering intelligence and preparing for the clandestine arrival of teams who would set up a logistical infrastructure; once the objective was thus prepared, combat support units —engineers and the like— would finish preparations for the rapid advance of the combat elements, who would be the last to enter Hue.[3]

Defensive Reaction

The third account is also anecdotal, although there must be some records, because it involved the visit to 1st Brigade in the spring of 1971 by the Secretary of the Army, Stanley R. Resor. The Secretary was on a tour of Vietnam, I was told, to explain to the troops President Nixon's decision, as part of his "Vietnamization policy," to have U.S. forces cease offensive operations, and to assume a posture described as "defensive reaction." We received only short notice of the visit, but I was able to land the Secretary's entourage at one of our fire bases around noontime, and there to enable his joining a rifle company for a meeting followed by lunch. The troops had just been extracted from the western (Laos) side of the Ashau Valley. Inserted by helicopters the previous dusk, the company had moved stealthily to set up an ambush on was thought to be

[3] My estimate for the offensive was off by several weeks. The NVA attacked at Easter, 1972 (late April-early May), and its offensive toward Hue drove not NW up the compromised Gorman Road, but directly eastward along Route 547, a road improved by U.S. Army engineers to support the principal fire bases built by 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division: Bastogne, and Checkmate. These fell to NVA regiments on 28 April 1972.

part of the Gorman Road. Just after midnight it intercepted and destroyed several NVA trucks, killing the crews. Unscathed, with captured NVA weapons and documents, our troops withdrew to prearranged PZs for extraction the next morning. Secretary Resor arrived after they had been debriefed, but their adrenalin was still up, and they were noisy and jovial. They quieted down, however, to listen respectfully to the Secretary, asked polite questions, and then shared with him their C-ration lunch. I am not sure either side of that dialogue understood the other, and I doubt that what those soldiers had accomplished fitted the rubric of "defensive reaction." I am sure that any Ranger company would have been proud of the operation just concluded by a force stripped altogether to minimal fighting weight, who executed their mission with competence, blackened faces all around, and high confidence.

The foregoing operational glimpses are not intended to suggest that success always attended patrols of the 1st Brigade, or that load austerity worked always and everywhere. Load austerity function only where there is firm trust between foot soldiers and the chain of command that they will be supplied with what they need to fight, and reinforced when necessary. Establishing and maintaining that trust necessitates a very high priority for aerial delivery or other forms of resupply missions. In the 1st Brigade, one potential disaster was averted when a company operating in the central Ashau Valley during the late autumn monsoon found itself short of radio batteries and fogged in. The ceiling was a few tens of feet, and visibility was severely limited and chancy. Knowing that once the patrol's communications went dead, it would be easy prey for the NVA, I tasked my two best pilots to fly into them. Literally with the skids of their HUIH in the treetops, navigating partially with the assistance of a USMC Air Support Radar Team, but mainly by following streams, hovering from time to time to wait for breaks in the swirling mist, those two warrant officers managed to reach the company, and to drop several boxes of supplies. To my immense relief, they also succeeded in flying back the way they came. Distinguished flying, indeed.

But their failure, tragic as it might have been, could have had the effect of teaching subordinates to load up

the troops with extra batteries, or extra rations, water or ammo every time the weather looked threatening.

And it certainly could have constituted a setback for trust in the chain of command.