

Jungle Zap

Maj. Scott Schultz, U.S. Army

Americans in 1950 rediscovered in something that since Hiroshima they had forgotten: you may fly over a land forever; you may bomb it, atomize it, pulverize it and wipe it clean of life—but if you desire to defend it, protect it, and keep it for civilization, you must do this on the ground, the way the Roman legions did, by putting your young men into the mud.

—T.R. Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War*

I couldn't believe it. Here I was. An American soldier. Fighting a land war in Asia. Again. Perhaps this wouldn't have seemed so abnormal if I hadn't been listening to "Graveyard Train" by Creedence Clearwater Revival during the aerial insertion. In the odd calm after my last orders to my squad leaders and before landing, I had been overlooking the deep sea

of darkness below me, vast and bottomless. Even with my IVAS it looked impenetrable. The whoop-whoop-whoop of Huey helicopters had been replaced by the whine of turbines that was subdued, but certainly not quiet. Like every other person in history entering battle, I was uncomfortable. It was hot and sticky. I couldn't tell if I was feeling sleepy because of the heat, the overall lack of sleep, the lull of travel, or if it was simply my equipment slowly compressing the artery that supplied air to my brain. All of this felt like a normal training mission in the back forty at Fort Campbell—except hotter. And it wasn't.

The world was different. The path to this point was long, winding, and perhaps included some alterations to the time-space continuum. The simple cause was vacuum. After winning the Cold War, the United



States got dizzy in its victory laps and collapsed on itself. Domestic issues consumed public attention, and elected leaders perpetuated the trends by distracting voters from issues with a frenetic tempo of controversies, hyperbole, and narratives. The United States went blind to the rest of the world. Its leadership role in international affairs faded, and former friends turned to ambivalent onlookers.

Meanwhile, others were making moves. China's economy overtook the American economy in the mid-2020s. The CCP, communist in name only at this point, had aggressive regional goals. While its population growth had leveled off, its middle class had expanded from the center. This segment had growing demands and a willingness to take from others. When economic strong-arming didn't work, military force would do. That's led us to now.

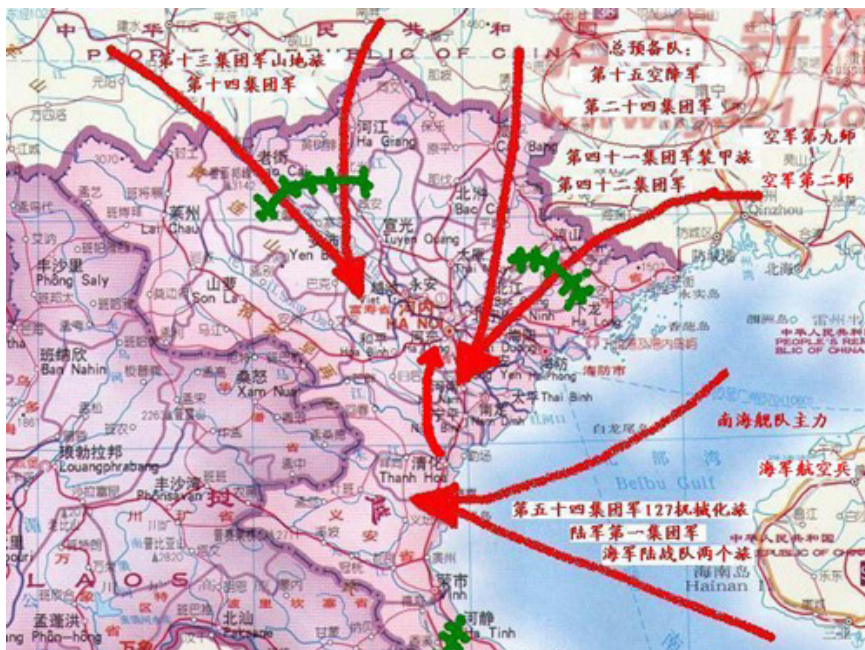
Vietnam has a long history of fighting foreigners. Unsatisfied with the aging international order, China claimed and took possession of the South China Sea. It somehow managed this without firing a shot at an American ship, probably because of an open Arctic passageway. The Chinese navy easily defeated the small Vietnamese navy, mined its harbors, and began its landward expansion toward Hanoi. They felt the fertile Mekong Delta was within their reach as well. This goes to show how far the United States had faded from the

international stage. Yet, it was not completely absent. A small number of key congressional members felt it was

in the national interest to reenter the world's stage. This movement gained momentum and resulted in the commitment of actual forces to the defense of Vietnam's sovereignty. The Vietnamese were as fierce as ever, but they could not hold off the Chinese colossal dragon for very long.

In a classical

American fashion, the first units committed were not well prepared to do what was asked of them. The Navy was unable to access the theater from the east and primarily operated on the edge of the Chinese missile bubbles in the central Indian Ocean. The air forces slugged it out in the air and had established vertical battle lines. It was considered suicide for a manned aircraft on either side to approach the other's antiaircraft missile batteries. Drones could do it, but only for short periods of time before they were destroyed. In an iterative cycle, cheap systems were defeated by cheap solutions. It was difficult to say what happened in space, but as a constant, comms were spotty. Ground forces faced significant difficulties. Purposefully, the Vietnamese had limited infrastructure development in the northern portions of their country close to China. Heavy vehicles were limited to roads and



Map courtesy of South China Morning Post

Previous page: Soldiers from the 82nd Airborne Division use the latest prototype of the Integrated Visual Augmentation System (IVAS) during a trench-clearing exercise in October 2020 at Fort Pickett, Virginia. (Photo by Bridgett Siter, Army Futures Command)

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the speed of warfare largely slowed to the pace of walking again. And, carrying only what was needed to that—thankfully somewhat assisted.

After significant losses of expensive equipment in the opening stages, the war had simmered down a bit. That leads me to here.

My name is 1st Lt. Maxine Rader, and I'm the platoon leader for First Platoon, Charlie Company, 1-506 IN of the 101st Air Assault Division.

We are landing ten kilometers south of the Chinese-Vietnamese border and east of the Red River to conduct a search and attack mission to clear any Chinese on this side of the border. It's part of a larger mission, but ours is focused in the mountainous jungle region. It is a place that seemingly no one should

hunter-killer drones were swarming in that area. We wouldn't have stood a chance if that were the case here.

But a shortcoming of the drones is that they cannot distinguish between us and their own troops. So the Chinese are somewhat cautious about using those systems all the time. It's now time to earn our pay.

My sleepiness faded instantly as I perceived the ground ap-

proaching. It was replaced by a racing pulse and sense of panic as I checked and rechecked my IVAS heads-up-display map, my laminated map, and compass to ensure we were at the right spot.

As far as I could tell we were, but I would check with my platoon sergeant after getting off the birds.



Marines experiment with the Legged Squad Support System 10 July 2014 at the Kahuku Training Area in Hawaii during the Rim of the Pacific 2014 exercise. (Photo by Sgt. Sarah Dietz, U.S. Marine Corps)

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want. Somewhere east of us was a Vietnamese division doing the same thing, trying to reestablish the border and a bit of normalcy. We landed far away from our sector, blocked by a high ridge to avoid detection, and planned to walk the rest of the way. Chinese units were well equipped with enough firepower to bring down low-flying troop-carrying ships. This was a lesson that Able Company had learned the hard way. We further masked our insertion by requesting indirect fire support and drone surveillance of a false LZ. Odds are that Chinese artillery fired mines and autonomous

All four ships touched down at the same time and out jumped forty-four of us: three rifle squads, a weapons squad, a mortar section, me, my RTO, a medic, and my platoon sergeant. Not that much different from an infantry platoon from fifty years ago, except each squad was assisted by a walking pack bot and the mortar section was a walking gun system.

And while each was loaded down, the Army had done at least one thing right to reverse the age-old trend. A cruel joke had always been to call light infantry light. There was nothing light about it until the last

decade or so. Finally, someone had figured out how to make equipment, armor, ammunition, weapons, and chow lighter.

The same could not be said about water though. Perhaps that would take another hundred years or so. Soldiers were up and walking with no more than a third of their body weight hanging off of them. This was possible by combining technologies

into useful multifunction tools, the discovery of lightweight durable materials, and long-lasting rechargeable batteries. The temptation to replace the old weight with new weight was there, but a strong-willed leader like me could avoid it.

The IVAS was a great tool. This latest version connected to my helmet, allowed me to communicate with

Our enemy had gone about solving the light infantry dilemma differently. The PLA considered ethics

quite differently than we. Service in the Chinese army involved biological enhancements. Each Chinese soldier had a pretty good chance of making it in the NFL.

This made them more lethal and physically capable soldiers. Radios embed-

ded into their skulls enabled constant communication. It was some serious science-fiction stuff. Their weaponry could be heavier; they could carry more ammo, fight harder, and concentrate when necessary. Images of the conquering Red Army had flooded my childhood during the Indo-Chinese border wars. The Chinese troops had faced some significant dilemmas. The giant



Digitization Individual Soldier System with Real Network Communication Technology (Image from Chinese defense company Beijing TongMeiDa, courtesy of Army Recognition Blog)

“ The PLA considered ethics quite differently than we. Service in the Chinese army involved biological enhancements. Each Chinese soldier had a pretty good chance of making it in the NFL. ”

my subordinates via more than FM radio if necessary and showed me their biological outputs and plan missions. I could communicate with higher echelons, acquire and fire targets with my weapon, overlay plans on terrain, share a common operating picture with my subordinate leaders, and a lot more. However, many of the functions were limited by connections to the network. Network connections were dangerous, especially near an enemy that knew how to find and target them. A key to survival was to minimize individual connections to the network and to hide it when connections were necessary.

and seemingly unbeatable dragon needed a substantial tail to operate. Each individual Chinese soldier needed at least ten thousand calories per day simply to live. If they were fighting or patrolling, the number could be doubled. Otherwise, they simply ran out of gas or started focusing on sustaining themselves rather than maintaining discipline. Besides that, all their orders came from the top. Their ability to fight as small units was limited to what they were ordered to do beforehand. In their doctrine, initiative was a dangerous political motivation. The name of the game was figuring out how to use these weaknesses against them.

After consolidating on one side of the LZ, my lead squad took off in the direction of our area of operations. While the distance between the LZ and the AO was a straight-line distance of ten kilometers, the planned route would take fifteen. At roughly one kilometer per hour, this was going to be a long trip. However, we had planned to take two days to get into the AO, three days there patrolling, and then two days getting back. That was about the limit of our reach without a resupply. And we did not expect more than a single major engagement with the enemy. Resupplies were dangerous for everyone involved, and we again wanted to minimize our exposure. Every plan requires some assumptions.

The movement seemed routine enough. Although it was dark, our IVAS allowed us to see in the jungle night via thermal imaging. The pace felt slow because of the up and down hill movements. No matter how quiet we thought we were, it wasn't quiet enough. The walking gun systems especially. They were specially outfitted with noise-dampening features, but they were still machines walking across broken terrain and through dense brush. That said, I would rather have them than not. They provided us with organic indirect fire capabilities and could fight on their own to enable our escape if necessary. Plus, they could carry much more than any ten of us.

As day broke, my lead squad came across some evidence that we were not alone in the jungle. Trash.

A ton of it. With Mandarin writing on it. It was clear than a Chinese company had been here within the last twenty-four hours. The smell was a dead giveaway. Any group of 150 people walking through the jungle eating four days' worth of food at a time was going to leave a distinct oratory trace. I might have thought that we seemed like elephants, but this site made us seem like mice. This was also a sign that I might need to consider changing the mission. It was surprising that there were no traps left behind or other surveillance devices. If anything, this site indicated that something bigger was going on. Whatever element had been here was the lead edge.

I told my platoon sergeant to take us off our planned route and to a nearby low-lying area away from any natural lines of drift. While he led the formation there, my RTO and I took stock of the electromagnetic spectrum. It was blasting on all frequencies by something powerful. The Chinese were clearly masking something and we were in the way of some commander's red arrow leading toward Hanoi. Odds are that the Chinese company had used that site for a specific reason. A quick map analysis showed that it offered good cover from surveillance and that the area would be used again for similar purposes. We were not going to go any further into the mouth of dragon. We would fight here. ■

Glossary

AO—Area of operations

CCP—Chinese Communist Party

FM—Frequency modulation

IN—Infantry

IVAS—Individual visual augmentation system

LZ—Landing zone

RT—Radio/telephone operator