



Soldiers Loading Grenada

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IN THE world of professional sports, owners, and especially players, quickly lose faith in a coaching staff that is not devoted to improving play or not focused on winning. Before the game, coaches conduct practices and rehearsals to improve performance. During the game, coaches pool all available information and direct it toward the field. Why? To win. After the game, coaches scrutinize each play and player to determine how the team can do even better the next time.

Military leaders are analogous to sports coaches. Military leaders have to train, direct and critique their units. It has long been recognized in the military that after-action reports are invaluable and should be completed after every training exercise and combat mission. S. L. A. Marshall demonstrated that interviews conducted with soldiers and leaders immediately after battle are most beneficial. He wrote that, with such interviews, we can "understand the es-

sence of leadership and training in the many things we did right." He continued by saying, "the whole army might be able to profit and other men's lives would be saved."²

The information on which this article is based was obtained during interviews conducted by researchers from the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research. Members of seven infantry battalions who participated in Operation *Urgent Fury* in Grenada were interviewed. Three battalions' members were interviewed in Grenada as soon after participating in combat as the situation permitted. The soldiers of the other four battalions were interviewed after redeployment to the United States. While some battalion commanders and brigade staff members were interviewed, a special effort was made to interview the soldiers and company-level leaders who saw the most combat action.

Here, the information gathered from these interviews addresses only one of the

questions growing out of the Grenada operation: What caused some soldiers to be physically overloaded? Two main items of interest emerged. The causes for soldier overloading, which Marshall presented more than 35 years ago, persist.³ In addition, the causes Marshall identified are actually the effects of a more basic cause: a normal psychological reaction to an increase in uncertainty.

Not all soldiers who fought in Grenada were overloaded. Some unit commanders cut their soldiers' load to the minimum, limited contingency equipment and eliminated all nonessential items. These commanders took some risks, but they knew overloaded soldiers would reduce the unit's ability to fight and win. Unfortunately, too few commanders enforced load discipline. Consider this soldier's observation:

We attacked to secure the airhead. We were like slow-moving turtles. My rucksack weighed 120 pounds. I would get up and rush for 10 yards, throw myself down and couldn't get up. I'd rest for 10 or 15 minutes, struggle to get up, go 10 more yards, and collapse. After a few rushes, I was physically unable to move, and I am in great shape. Finally, after I got to the assembly area, I shucked my rucksack and was able to fight, but I was totally drained.

Consider another soldier's telling comment: "I was scared that I was going to get killed because I couldn't really run with that rucksack on."

Even allowing for some exaggeration by the soldiers, no one can doubt they were overloaded. In the tropic heat of Grenada, excessive loads not only led to poor fighting but, in some cases, to no fighting at all. For example, in one day, 29 soldiers in one battalion were incapacitated by the heat. Another battalion's aid station treated 48 heat casualties, and a third battalion's aid station used its entire supply of intravenous (IV) solution on heat casualties. Certainly, some heat problems were due to poor condi-

tioning, no time to acclimatize and heavy uniforms. Equally certain, however, is that overloading contributed to the high number of heat casualties. Consider this soldier's comment:

I thought the rucksacks we were taking had too much in them. . . . They were a little too heavy. It proved out once we got down there. . . . There were all those guys sitting on the side of the road with IV tubes in them.

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There's no way the guys could do it. We got most of those heat casualties walking up that one hill

Another soldier said his unit had to sit down about halfway up a hill to wait for the rest of his unit to catch up. This soldier added, "Even the commanding officer fell out of that one. He was dead tired; he also lost all of his radio-telephone operators."

Why do commanders permit their soldiers to enter battle overloaded? Marshall claimed that three false beliefs are the culprits. These false beliefs are:

- **Overloading with ammunition is good for battle morale.**⁴ Admittedly, being issued no ammunition would likely affect a soldier's morale in the most adverse way. But does more and more ammunition mean better and better morale? No. Morale is not a function of the amount of ammunition a soldier carries; rather, according to Marshall:

. . . battle morale, willingness [to fight],



Infantry in Grenada,
October 1983

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Seventh Army troops in France, 18 March 1945

and efficiency [of fighting] are in the ratio of [their soldier's] knowledge of the man on whom they are depending for close support.⁵

By "close support," Marshall does not mean artillery or air support. He is talking about a soldier's trust and confidence in the reliability of those around him, in his immediate leaders and in the chain of command. Those are the grounds for morale. Author John Ellis echoes Marshall's claim when he says:

The fighting soldiers were sustained by a regard for others in which self-respect and mutual esteem were so inextricably intertwined that courage was commonplace, self-sacrifice the norm.⁶

Marshall goes on to say that:

... the willing fighter will spend his last round if convinced that the tactical situation requires it. And he will then look around to see where he can get some more ammunition.⁷

The action of the 101st Airborne Division at Bastogne, Belgium, the British 1st Airborne Division at Arnhem, Netherlands, and the 1st Marine Division in Korea are three dramatic examples of units experiencing ammunition shortages but retaining high levels of morale.

The fighting in Grenada confirms Marshall's claim. When platoons in heavy contact were down to their last one and one-half magazines of ammunition, their morale did not suffer. Instead, they redistributed what ammunition they had and, despite several dead and wounded, continued the attack. At the end of one contact, a soldier reported that he "looked at [his] bandoleer and found [he] only had one round left." Marshall would take this as further evidence against the belief that overloading with ammunition is good for morale. Although this may not be an ironclad deduction in the Aristotelian sense, it is certainly clear that US units in Grenada paid a high price in heat casualties and overall mobility for an unnecessary

and insufficient attempt to raise morale.

• **Ammunition shortages have often been a cause of tactical disarrangements—that is, the unsettling or disordering of units—in past wars and are, therefore, to be avoided at all costs.** Marshall, however, asserted that, in the "conditions of modern warfare, defeat because of an ammunition shortage

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is among the things least likely to happen."⁸ The methods of resupply, even in periods of poor weather, are simply too plentiful.

Units are disarranged as a result of what Paddy Griffith identifies as "a number of psychological shocks, coming one after another in quick succession."⁹ Griffith draws his conclusions initially from a close analysis of the British and French battle at Vimereiro on 21 August 1808. He then goes on to demonstrate that the same conclusion is confirmed in both world wars, the Vietnam War and the 1973 Arab-Israeli War. Retired Major General John Frost provides further support when he describes several occasions in the Falklands when British paratroopers "disarranged" Argentine forces although the paratroopers were low on ammunition.¹¹

In Grenada, the best trained units carried only a basic load of ammunition, fought the hardest combat, ran low on ammunition, redistributed it and continued the attack. These units created a "series of psychologi-

cal shocks" by their intense fire and relentless attacks, shocks which disarranged the Cuban and Grenadian forces. Marshall stated that ammunition shortages seldom if ever occur, and the belief that units invariably fall apart when experiencing ammunition shortages is false. The Grenada interviews showed that, although no units disengaged because of ammunition shortages, more than a few had difficulty making and maintaining contact because of excessive loads.

• The soldier should be prepared for every possible contingency that might confront him.¹² According to Marshall, this false belief is one to which a staff usually succumbs. He says:

... when a staff is ignorant on this subject [how much a soldier should carry], then woe to the fighting line! The damage will not be undone, for a price will certainly be paid.¹³

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The most interesting example Marshall gives concerns the Omaha Beach landings of World War II:

When I had concluded my work with the survivors of the companies which had landed during the initial Omaha assault, the impression was inescapable that weight and water—directly or indirectly—were the cause of the greater part of our losses at the beach. . . . The fundamental error was a simple

one. We [the planning staff] overestimated the physical strength of men in the conditions of combat.¹⁴

In assessment, Marshall added:

. . . the troops [assaulting Omaha Beach] found themselves in water often up to their necks, their burdensome equipment dragged them back down as they tried to wade free, bullets chopping away at them, with drowning the almost certain fate of the wounded.¹⁵

Interviews with soldiers who fought in Grenada confirm Marshall's conclusions. It appears, though, that it is not just the staff but the soldier himself who is susceptible to this belief. Some soldiers—a minority—reported that their units set clear and unambiguous standards as to what each soldier would carry. These soldiers reported that their commanders and staff were aware of the maximum load a soldier should carry into combat. Other soldiers—the majority—said their leaders provided no guidance or that the guidance was ambiguous or ill-enforced. Some soldiers related that they were allowed to go through the arms room and pick up extra weapons. They were also allowed to go through the ammunition line as many times as they felt necessary. Many thought they needed a great deal of ammunition, and the lack of firm directions resulted in overloaded soldiers.

While leaders and staffs did not direct overloading, their lack of guidance and supervision left soldiers, and some commanders, uncertain as to what to expect and how to prepare. Thus, these interviews suggest that too little guidance has the same result as wrong guidance—overloaded soldiers.

Marshall concludes that the three false beliefs cause the overloading of soldiers. The information obtained from leaders and soldiers who fought in Grenada suggests that Marshall's conclusions are incomplete. The three false beliefs he identifies do not constitute the final cause of soldier over-

What should a commander do?

- Avoid S. L. A. Marshall's three false beliefs.
- Know that excess weight kills your soldiers
- Set and enforce specific weight standards
- Train to carry weight
- Build trust

What is the optimal load?

- The optimal training load is one-third of a soldier's body weight¹
- Know that fear reduces a soldier's physical stamina. The optimal fighting load is 80 percent of the training weight²

What should you carry?

- Know that considerations of METT-T (mission, enemy, terrain, troops and time available) will change some of the required items.
- Use Field Manual 101-10-1, *Staff Officers' Field Manual: Organizational, Technical and Logistical Data Unclassified Data*, to identify historical ammunition usage rates.

How can you build trust?

- Realize that trust is tripartite: trust within a unit, trust between units and trust among services
- Establish and enforce high combat-skill standards
- Share realistic training with units with which you are likely to fight
- Use competition among subordinate units correctly, do not let competition cause mistrust
- Avoid building unit cohesion by decreasing confidence in other units
- Counter the tendency to mistrust other services—focus on trust, not mistrust.
- Use military history to demonstrate that no single unit (or service) wins wars by itself

How can you correctly control information?

- Get the information the unit needs to plan, coordinate and conduct its mission properly.
- Realize you never have all the information you want, but do not get complacent—always try to get more



- Keep information moving to those who need it
- Inform the friendly, deny the enemy

Can we learn from success?

- Only if we are honest and call things as we see them
- Only if we identify areas for improvement
- Only if we care enough for our soldiers

¹ S. L. A. Marshall, *The Soldier's Load and the Mobility of a Nation*, Marachut Holzat-Maachar, Israel, pp. 22-27 and 68-73 and *Infantry News: The Soldier's Load*, *Infantry*, September-October 1984, p. 7.

² Marshall, op. cit. pp. 44-47 and 51-60; John Ellis, *The Sharp End*, Charles Scribner's Sons, N.Y., 1980, pp. 234-39 and *Shelford Bidwell: The Chinese War*, Macmillan Publishing Co., N.Y., 1979, p. 54.

³ S. L. A. Marshall, *Men Against War: The Problem of Battle Command in Future War*, Peter Smith, Magnolia, Mass., 1978, pp. 85-156.

loading. The beliefs are actually the effects of a single, more basic cause—uncertainty. Waris, and always has been, a realm of danger and uncertainty. Now we add to this a simple, psychological truth of human nature: people preparing to enter a personal

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ly dangerous and uncertain situation base their plans on the worst possible outcome. The result is overloading.

Interviews with soldiers and leaders who fought in Grenada support the claim that overloading is a psychological response to loss of control in the face of uncertainty. Further, these interviews suggest that uncertainty increases when soldiers do not know what they are up against; with whom they are fighting; or how, when and by whom they will be supported. Uncertainty further increases when soldiers do not trust themselves, the members of their unit, their equipment, their chain of command, other units with whom they will fight or the units upon whom they will rely for support. Here are some examples to support these statements:

- During the planning and deployment phases of Grenada, the estimate of the enemy's strength and disposition constantly changed. Many leaders and soldiers echoed this soldier's account:

At first, we were told that a Colonel was simply going to talk to the Cubans who were

holding the students. Then we were told that there were 400 Grenadians. . . . then we heard that there are some antiaircraft guns and we may run into a little trouble. All of this happened before we left.

One commander stated:

At first, we were told that there would be little, if any, resistance; as time went on, the reports indicated that we were to expect the exact opposite of what we had been told earlier. . . . [Toward the end we were told] that every 100 meters is loaded with Cubans.

- During neither the planning nor the early part of the execution phase did the initial assault units know whether they would be reinforced. One commander remarked how surprised he was when the 82d Airborne Division landed because he did not know that it was participating in the operation.

- Critical details of the support plan, combat support and combat service support were not available during the planning phase. Commanders reported that they did not know what air or naval support was available, what the logistical plan was or who was providing logistical support. One physician said, "We didn't know anything about medevac [medical evacuation]. That was a critical lack of information."

Constantly changing information or lack of information creates uncertainty in the minds of soldiers and leaders. Although some unit commanders resisted the temptation to overload their soldiers, others succumbed. And who can blame them? One of the most important responsibilities of a commander is to husband the lives of the soldiers entrusted to him. Under the conditions of uncertainty caused by lack of or conflicting information, commanders and staffs will fall more easily to one of the false beliefs.

Each of the examples given demonstrates that the fighting units lacked vital information (needed to properly plan and coordinate



the operation). Operational security requires the proper control of information. However, proper control denies the information to the enemy. Proper control does not prevent the information from being given to those people who need it most—those given the responsibility to fight and win. While too little secrecy allows the enemy to obtain information, too much secrecy keeps information from those needing it. Marshall asserts that this is often the problem:

It is a truth beyond argument that full and accurate information becomes most vital at the point of impact, for unless it is correctly applied there, the wisest of plans and the ablest general will likely fail. But the organization of tactical information during combat runs directly counter to this principle, almost as if it followed an unwritten law—the lower the rank of the commander, the less he is entitled to know about his own affairs.¹⁶

Information affects uncertainty, and so does trust. When soldiers do not trust them-

selves, their buddies or the equipment and weapons they use, uncertainty increases. Fortunately, there are many positive reports from Grenada. Soldiers trusted themselves, their buddies, their equipment and their weapons. One soldier said:

Our training and discipline helped us make it back. We trained with live rounds, that helped a lot. I knew my job, and I knew that none of [my buddies] were going to shoot me in the back.

This trust may be at least one of the major reasons why the soldiers did not hesitate to deploy and fight. The interviews reveal, however, that trust such as this was not universal.

Some soldiers, while knowing the units with whom they deployed, had not shared positive training experiences. The units lacked a common respect. Fortunately, this lack of respect did not seem to seriously hamper combat operations. However, it was sufficient to sow a seed of doubt as to the reli-

ability of adjacent units. One soldier related: "[One unit] shot at a target for 30 minutes but only hit it once. We doubted their competence." Another soldier spoke of a patrol his unit conducted forward of a defensive position manned by soldiers of another unit. During the patrol, he said:

We weren't worried about getting shot by our buddies; we had good training. . . . But, we took fire [during the patrol] from an M60 [machinegun] [from the other unit's defensive position].

Certainly, these two examples do not bespeak general incompetence. However, soldiers who have these experiences do come

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to doubt the reliability of other units. These doubts are not only difficult to allay, but they erode confidence. Further, these doubts may well adversely affect operations the next time these units have to fight together.

During contingency operations, several different types of units must work together. The interviews indicated that US Army units that had trained together and developed common operating procedures trusted each other. One officer commented that his unit had:

trained repeatedly with some army aviation units. [We] worked out common SOPs [standing operating procedures], we had common expectations and we developed

personal relationships. And when time was short, and complete coordination impossible, that [working together] was the key.

On the other hand, several interviews suggest the opposite. One soldier reported that:

. . . the . . . crews [created] a high level of stress. They didn't know what they were doing. They were in the way. . . . They used casualties as cover. . . . It really helped to get [them] out. [When they left], they didn't [want to] take any casualties with them, they kicked them off to make room for themselves.

This kind of experience, even if rare, does not create trust and confidence between units—quite the opposite.

Contingency operations are usually joint operations with units of different services working together. In Grenada, many joint operations were successful:

We felt good knowing the AC130s were in support. We trained with them; we felt confidence in them

when we were loading onto helos for a mission, we saw the AC130s taxiing to take off. One pilot stuck his arm out of the window and gave a thumbs up sign. Morale soared.

These kinds of experiences can only help in future operations. Unfortunately, experiences like these were not ubiquitous.

In one case, an Army unit reported that pilots refused to deliver some vehicles containing equipment and ammunition. Consequently, the unit fought its heaviest combat without its full complement of equipment. Another interview revealed that "the [perceived] reason they could not get our equipment in was crew rest. Peacetime safety regulations would not permit the crew to fly any more." This report, even if merely secondhand hearsay, is most damaging to trust.

Of course, any of the reports in the foregoing examples may be misperceptions. We hope they are. However, Army units with such experiences may believe that elements

they must deploy with are not trustworthy. This results in Army units trying to be more self-sufficient. Units may think they must carry in everything they need because they do not know if "so-and-so" is really going to get there. Lack of trust breeds overloading.

The interviews with soldiers and leaders who fought in Grenada permit a minimal conclusion: when soldiers and leaders do not have all the information they should or when soldiers and leaders do not trust those with whom they fight, uncertainty increases. When uncertainty increases, the combat load increases.

Like football, the military is a profession in which zero defects is impossible. The nature of war and the human beings who fight it preclude perfection. But, also like foot-

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ball, the profession demands continuous striving toward that goal. You must improve self and "team" as much as possible so that victory results every time you set foot on the "field." Rather than put on the mask of zero defects and feign perfection, the Army should be proud of its commitment to the goals of improvement and winning. *MR*

NOTES

1 S. L. A. Marshall, *Island Victory: The Battle of Kwajalein Atoll*, Zenger Publishing, Washington D.C. 1982 p.2

2 *Ibid.* p.6

3 S. L. A. Marshall, *The Soldier's Load and the Mobility of a Nation*, Macmillan, New York 1952

4 *Ibid.* p.18

5 S. L. A. Marshall, *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command in Future War*, Peter Smith, Magnolia, Mass. 1978 p.152

6 John Ellis, *The Sharp End*, Charles Scribner's Sons, N.Y. 1980 p.352

7 Marshall, *The Soldier's Load and the Mobility of a Nation*, op. cit.

8 *Ibid.*

9 *Ibid.*

10 Paddy Griffith, *Forward into Battle: Fighting Tactics From Waterloo to Vietnam*, Anthony Bird Publications, Stratford, Sussex, Eng. 1981, p.22

11 John Frost, *2 Para Falls: The Battalion at War*, Buchan & Enright, London, Eng. 1963, pp.72, 83, 84 and 92

12 Marshall, *The Soldier's Load and the Mobility of a Nation*, op. cit. p.30

13 *Ibid.*

14 *Ibid.* p.35

15 *Ibid.* p.79

16 Marshall, *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command in Future War*, op. cit. p.101



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