



Pfc. Jordon Kirby (left), an M249 light machine gunner, and Spc. Isaiah Fernandez, a team leader, both with 1st Battalion, 506th Infantry Regiment "Red Currahee," 1st Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), supporting 3rd Infantry Division, hold their position during a force-on-force situational training exercise with Latvian and Polish armed forces at Camp Adazi, Latvia, 16 September 2023. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Oscar Gollaz, U.S. Army)

The Queen of Battle

A Case for True Light Infantry Capability

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Light infantry units become the masters of their environment. Light infantrymen do not fight, fear, or resist the environment; they embrace it as shelter, protection, provider, and home. They learn to be comfortable and secure in any terrain and climate, be it jungle, mountain, desert, swamp, or arctic tundra. Exceptionally adaptable, light infantry units dominate terrain in which they operate and use it to their advantage against their enemies.

—Scott McMichael,
A Historical Perspective on Light Infantry

This article calls to action the reawakening for true light infantry, the “Queen of Battle,” for all eventualities of war.¹ The U.S. Army will rely on light infantry divisions to fight and win in rugged and inhospitable terrain and in small and potentially isolated formations during large-scale combat operations (LSCO). This article is designed to generate dialogue within the force to understand the origins of true light infantry and articulate a need to rediscover its inherent advantages. Additionally, this article presents considerations for how to operationalize emerging doctrine and transform the light infantry within the Army’s modernization priorities into the lighter, more self-sufficient and lethal formation that the modern battlefield demands.

The infantry is as old as warfare. Whether you call them grunts, foot soldiers,

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riflemen, or dismounts, they are the close-combat force. The infantry is the Queen of Battle because, like the queen in chess, infantry go anywhere they are required. Mountains, jungles, arctic plains, or rubble cities.

There are certainly tradeoffs and limitations to light infantry forces. Living and fighting out of your rucksack makes you agile and responsive. But once delivered to the battlefield, dismounted elements will be limited to the ground they can cover by foot or reliant on external air and ground lift assets for repositioning. Heavier forces will be able to organically cover more ground, exploit penetrations, and add a level of lethality that light infantry will not match on their own.

Therefore, light infantry serves as an essential—but just complementary—element of the combined arms team. When properly led, trained, and equipped, they become the most versatile piece on the chessboard, especially in restrictive, austere, and isolated environments.

The future need for light infantry awaits in alpine regions, urban landscapes, contested islands in the Pacific, and across arctic plains. This article is a call to reinvigorate or perhaps rediscover one crucial part of our combined arms maneuver arsenal in our next war: true light infantry forces.

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The U.S. Army claims to have entire *light* infantry divisions, but those original designations diminished over the years. Mission requirements just short of conflict and fielding initiatives slowly but steadily eroded the essence of light infantry's identity and made our light infantry divisions heavy with armored vehicles and metric tons of excess equipment. The light infantry has digressed from its true purpose and become anchored to logistical tails, ground lines of communication, and Tricon shipping containers full of gear. Fleets of vehicles and trailers still crowd their motor pools, even after the recent reduction of motorized infantry formations under the "Army Force Structure Transformation" announcement in February 2024.² Stacks of mission command equipment clutter command posts. Individual soldier loads cresting triple digits on the scale have eroded what used to be light infantry formations.

The physical architecture for light infantry already exists in the form of incredible infantry units like the 10th Mountain Division, the 11th Infantry Division, the 25th Infantry Division, the 82nd Airborne Division, and 101st Airborne Division. These divisions have a storied history from World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and modern conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. They are among the best infantry divisions in the world. However, none of them are truly *light* infantry divisions as originally intended. No one is necessarily at fault, we just lost the meaning of what a veritable light infantry division represents, what makes light infantry *truly* light, and what the role of light infantry has always been and will be in future conflicts.

To appreciate the case for true light infantry capabilities in LSCO, we must first understand what it means to be light infantry and how that distinct style of infantry came about in the U.S. Army. This article begins by looking at the light infantry in retrospect, starting with the establishment of light infantry in the 1980s. Then, we follow the roots of the infantry's core characteristics back from the American Revolution to the infantrymen of World War II. After tracing the characteristics that make American light infantry unique, we look in prospect at the future of the light infantry given observations from contemporary conflicts to potentially inform the U.S. Army's doctrinal transition toward multidomain operations. Lastly, this article examines how the U.S. Army's six modernization priorities can help enable the Queen of Battle to amplify and enable true light infantry

capability that the joint force will undoubtedly need in LSCO.

A Modern Distinction Separating Regular and Light Infantry

The universal idea of light infantry is not new. The U.S. Army certainly did not invent it. However, the modern concept of a light infantry division as a distinct organization from mechanized and regular infantry forces only emerged in the U.S. Army around 1984.³

The process started when the U.S. Army took stock of what the infantry had become in the decade after Vietnam. Gen. John Wickham was the chief of staff of the Army at the time. The Soviet Union remained the pacing threat as the main Cold War rival, and U.S. maneuver forces were built around defending against anticipated Warsaw Pact armored advances across the Fulda Gap. The infantry was prepared to fight large-scale battles alongside or in support of large-scale tank engagements. For this reason, the Army replaced many of the armored personnel carriers in mechanized infantry units with the new Bradley Fighting Vehicle, and the infantry trained for a supporting dismounted fight, focusing on killing tanks, breaching fortified strongholds, and occupying and holding key terrain. These mission-essential tasks made even standard infantry units reliant on vehicles to "carry the array of heavy equipment it need[ed] to do its job."⁴ So, like dragoons of the sixteenth century, the weighed-down infantryman of the early 1980s trained to ride into battle, dismount, and fight the enemy on foot.

But leaders like Wickham recognized a concerning capability gap: *the Queen of Battle could no longer go anywhere it wanted*. The infantry had become too heavy and cumbersome. Regular infantry had become fixed to its own logistical needs, which undermined one of the infantry's greatest attributes: its *versatility*. The U.S. Army relies and will continue to rely on light infantry formations to infiltrate, raid, attack, and ambush the enemy despite the most unforgiving terrain, weather, and circumstances.

What Is Light Infantry?

The essence of the light infantry transcends how they are equipped, what they are required to do, and even where they are asked to operate. The Combat Studies Institute published an extensive research survey in 1987 by Maj. Scott McMichael examining the historical



25th Infantry Division Lightning Academy air assault instructors conducted a rooftop insertion during a Fast Rope Insertion/Extraction System and Special Patrol Insertion/Extraction System (FRIES/SPIES) Master Course on 5 November 2020 at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii. (Photo by Spc. Jessica Scott, U.S. Army)

perspectives of what it meant to be light infantry. McMichael concluded, “Light infantry is, first of all, a state of mind, and secondarily, a product of organization.”⁵ This state of mind is best characterized as an attitude of self-reliance and junior leader initiative. Free from the tethers of roadways and mountains of logistics, light infantry learn to live out of their rucksacks. Their proverbial fuel tanks are their stomachs. And whenever feasible, they refill their canteens with water from creeks and surrounding snow.

The men and women of the light infantry embody a “strong confidence that they will survive and succeed in whatever situations they are found. They are undaunted by unfavorable conditions (such as being cut off or outnumbered) ... [and] devise schemes to accomplish their missions, no matter how difficult the tasks.”⁶

Col. Huba Wass de Czege, one of the principal architects of AirLand Battle doctrine, defined light infantry in 1985 as a force “specialized for rapid air transportability, clandestine insertion, very rugged terrain, night operations, infiltration, raids, and ambushes; it lives off only

small tactical signatures.”⁷ Wass de Czege recognized that light infantry fight where heavy forces cannot, defending “areas of rugged terrain so that they can become the fulcrum for defensive maneuver and counterattack.”⁸ He describes the balance as “*lightly but potently equipped*” and *nimble*.⁹ Light infantry forces buried in restricted terrain become hard to detect and harder to dislodge. Light infantry was meant to pose unsettling dilemmas for mounted opponents. Tanker crews learned in World War II that one of the greatest threats to armor was light infantrymen off the roads, buried somewhere among the hillsides, with shoulder-fired antitank systems.

Wass de Czege’s definition suggests we now have a fundamental misunderstanding of light infantry in its true form, which led to equipment-saturated light infantry formations and widespread misunderstanding of their original mission and intent. Anecdotally, the 10th Mountain Division has become a motorized infantry unit with excess equipment from years of fighting a counterinsurgency. The last twenty years conditioned “light” infantry units to become reliant on trucks to



Spc. Bradley Porter (*left*) and Spc. Ceaton Cooper, both paratroopers with 3rd Platoon, Company D, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade, clear the upper floor of an abandoned building during a bilateral training event with the Polish 6th Airborne Battalion, 16th Airborne Brigade (*not pictured*), in an urban operations training facility in Wędrzy, Poland, 21 November 2016. (Photo by Sgt. William Tanner, U.S. Army)

move personnel, deliver supplies, and power mission command equipment. Motor pool fleets required upward of 32 percent of a battalion to move their vehicles.¹⁰ Once one-third of the battalion buckled into seatbelts just to operate its organic equipment, it was no longer light. It became motorized. These *de facto* motorized units became conditioned to remain tied to ground lines of communication; not the hills or swamps or mountains but rather the roads, which are easily targetable. Our “light” formations have lost the true essence of the light infantry required to fight and win during LSCO. The stubborn attitude of self-reliance and unusual versatility is only gained through constant physical and mental conditioning. Fighting out of a rucksack requires more than individual discipline—it requires organizational culture.

The next war will be vicious and unforgiving. If light infantry formations do not align their order of battle and missions toward LSCO requirements, we will suffer costly losses on the battlefield. We potentially risk

unnecessary sacrifice and relearning lessons the Nation already knows if cannot reestablish, doctrinally codify, and modernize the true light infantry. The good news is the essence of the light infantry is already well-coded into the DNA of the ethos of the American warfighter mentality and the American way of war, so getting it back is entirely within the realm of the possible.

What we need is American light infantry unencumbered by bulky gear and led by junior leaders who own operations, solve tactical problems, and display the cunning, guile, and toughness to fight in small units while isolated. They fight in terrain that can only be accessed on foot, not by wheels, to complement the joint force. American light infantry fight in small elements not tied to lines of communication. They get into the rear of the enemy formations to create disruption and fear. True light infantry units not only thrive in rugged terrain, harsh conditions, and at night, they leverage their



Soldiers from Company A, 2nd Battalion, 22nd Infantry Regiment, 10th Mountain Division, quickly march to the ramp of the CH-47 Chinook that will return to Kandahar Army Air Field on 4 September 2003. The soldiers were searching in Daychopan District, Afghanistan, for Taliban fighters and illegal weapons caches. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Kyle Davis, U.S. Army)

advantages within the environment to help them destroy the enemy.

Ultimately, *there are two ways to make a fighting element nimble*: you can shed weight to make soldiers lighter, and you can allow competent leaders to exercise disciplined initiative, because nimbleness also comes from allowing junior leaders to take prudent risks. Leaders operating in remote corners of the battlefield can realize priceless dividends by making timely decisions in an LSCO fight based on their judgment and understanding of the broader mission. This is when the U.S. Army is at its best.

American Light Infantry

Tough training and lighter equipment make any good light infantry unit more lethal. What makes American light infantry distinct is the disciplined initiative and

mutual trust fostered among U.S. Army infantryman and their junior leaders. The noncommissioned officers (NCO) in the U.S. Army infantry are remarkable. Our junior leaders make the U.S. Army's light infantry unique. American light infantry fight as decentralized formations in restrictive terrain equipped with their weapons, rucksacks, some shared understanding, the commander's intent, and mission orders.

Americans have long been masters at using light infantry soldiers to bypass enemy strengths and advantages so they can attack critical vulnerabilities at times of their choosing. The American light infantry, leveraging the principles of patrolling, ambushes, and raids, draws its lineage from Robert Rogers, who introduced in the concept of *ranging* in the 1700s against the French and Indians.¹¹ As a teenager on the American frontier in the 1740s, Rogers spent much of his childhood with



The 11th Airborne Division was transferred to the Pacific theater of operations in June 1944. It saw its first action on the island of Leyte (Philippines) in a traditional infantry role. In January 1945, the division took part in the invasion of Luzon. The two glider infantry regiments again operated as conventional infantry, securing a beachhead before fighting their way inland. It later participated in the liberation of Manila. Of particular note, two companies of divisional paratroopers conducted an audacious raid on the Los Baños Internment Camp, liberating two thousand civilians. Its last combat operation of World War II was north of Luzon around Aparri, in aid of combined American and Philippine forces who were battling to subdue the remaining Japanese resistance on the island. (Photo courtesy of the National Archives)

Native American traders and adjoining tribesmen from the Mohawk and Penacook tribes.¹² Native Americans helped Rogers become self-sufficient in the wild New England forests and taught him ways to survive brutal winters on the frontier.¹³ Most importantly, Native Americans taught Rogers “not only good hunting practices but how to think about warfare.”¹⁴

Other American light infantry pioneers include Francis Marion, known as the “Swamp Fox,” and Thomas Sumter, who both plagued the British with their light infantry attacks throughout the American Revolutionary War.¹⁵

You can trace the roots of the American light infantry back to the Revolutionary War, where the British and other European nations did not fully appreciate the lethality that American light infantryman could

unleash in rugged terrain. In his *Army History* article “The Influence of Warfare in Colonial America: On the Development of British Light Infantry,” Jack E. Owen Jr. highlights how the British failed to appreciate this unique facet of the American way of war:

They neither reduced their emphasis on rigid discipline nor abandoned regular line of battle tactics, even in the American backwoods. They adapted and modified their military tactics and techniques to the French and Indian enemy and to the forested terrain, but this response to the uniqueness of warfare in America constituted neither the British Army’s conversion to light infantry tactics nor an acceptance of independent action on the battlefield by small groups of soldiers.¹⁶

The American light infantry mentality was also evident throughout World War II in a wide range of activities from Rudder's Rangers at Pointe du Hoc to the forces that seized the beaches of Normandy by land, sea, and air. From the enemy's perspective, the formidable American light infantry mentality led to several Axis miscalculations. For example, during Operation Cobra, the Allied breakout from Normandy, the Germans attempted to stymie Allied success with an aggressive armored counterattack at the town of Mortain that was unexpectedly parried by American light infantry.¹⁷

For six days, 2nd Battalion, 120th Infantry Regiment, held its positions atop Hill 314 overlooking a key German avenue of approach of five German Panzer and *Schutzstaffel* (SS) divisions.¹⁸ The infantry battalion became isolated from the rest of its regiment on the first day. They fought on. By day three, they were out of water, food, ammunition, and medical supplies. They fought on. A German officer from the SS approached their lines under a white flag with an offer to accept their surrender. The American infantry chose instead to fight more. One airdrop managed to deliver precious ammunition, food, and batteries. Medical supplies, including bandages, dressings, and morphine were shot (unsuccessfully) to the cutoff battalion by artillery in emptied smoke canisters.¹⁹ The 120th Infantry Regiment never abandoned Hill 314 and was eventually relieved by other American infantry units. "Their brilliant defense blunted the Panzer drive and allowed a major triumph for the allies."²⁰ The 120th Infantry, fighting as a dismounted battalion across Hill 314, proved too difficult to defeat for the German mechanized and armored divisions. The Germans did not fully account for the combat power of light infantry in restricted terrain, backed up by indirect fires, and experts at their craft. In the words of Gen. Omar Bradley, the German decision to attack "was to cost the enemy an Army and gain us France."²¹

During World War II, American light infantrymen of the 10th Mountain Division broke the Gothic Line, which had stymied the 5th Army in Italy for nearly six months. Light mountain troops ascended the fifteen-hundred-foot cliffs of Riva Ridge on fixed ropes at night in the snow and fog of winter and infiltrated one thousand troops to the top undetected by the German defenders. It was their first operation of the war, and it unraveled the Germans, who did not think a maneuver of this type was possible. Following Riva Ridge, the 10th

Mountain continued relentless pressure across tough terrain and beat the Germans at Mount Gorgolesco, Mount Belvedere, and Mount della Torraccia. The story of this great offensive is a story of sergeants and lieutenants and physically and mentally tough formations that the Germans had no answer for.

Fighting isolated and cut off for extended periods of time has since become the true essence of the American light infantry mentality. The "Little Groups of Paratroopers" of the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions in World War II demonstrated the power of American light infantry units that infiltrate deep into enemy territory, guided only by mission orders and intent.²² The 506th Infantry Regiment at the Battle of Bastogne verified the tenacity of light infantry forces even when isolated and minimally supplied in the most unremitting conditions. Cut off and surrounded, the American commander captured the spirit of the American light infantry in a single word when the Germans asked for their surrender. He simply replied, "NUTS!" The Americans then clarified to the German negotiators, "If you continue this foolish attack, your losses will be tremendous."²³ It was no bluff.

But the strength of a light infantry force is more than just a strong sense of self-reliance and determination. It must be able to fight as small units in complex environments against a technologically advanced enemy. The empowerment of junior leaders through the principles of mission command is what makes American light infantry unlike any other nation's light infantry force.²⁴ Today, the U.S. Army trains its warfighters to excel under adversity with only mission orders and intent.

The critical facet of the American light infantry culture is perhaps the most evident in the U.S. Army NCO corps and junior leader formation. Highly skilled soldiers and junior leaders will remain the U.S. Army's strength in upcoming conflicts. Gen. James Rainey and Lt. Gen. Laura Potter wrote about the Army of 2030, stating, "The most important factor to winning on the future battlefield is not a new piece of equipment or concept, but our people."²⁵ The future fight will rely on junior leaders, and the principles of mission command will be essential. Small American light infantry units *with little more than their weapons, rucksacks, and some disciplined initiative*, will "identify opportunities and act independently to achieve the overall intent without specific orders."²⁶ If that is what the future fight will require, then truly

light formations will be essential to meet the joint force's needs in LSCO. We can leverage this unique aspect of the American way of war by using existing knowledge to update our doctrine and modernizing accordingly to ultimately build a light infantry capability.

Transforming the Light Infantry for the Modern Battlefield

The U.S. Army formalized the operational concept of multidomain operations (MDO) into doctrine in 2022.²⁷ The transition to MDO, at least for light infantry, is an evolution—not a revolution. As the Army's role evolves in support the joint force under MDO, the light infantry should adapt with it. Lessons learned from contemporary conflicts, including the war in Ukraine, “have and continue to shape our transformational war fighting concept of multidomain operations.”²⁸ These conflicts offer many useful insights for how to evolve doctrine and transform the light infantry to fight in LSCO as well.

A Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) study on the war in Ukraine concluded, “There is no sanctuary in modern warfare. The enemy can strike throughout operational depth. Survivability depends on dispersing ammunitions stocks, command and control, maintenance areas and aircraft.”²⁹ Dispersion and unencumbered forces were key to survivability. “Ukraine successfully evaded Russia's initial wave of strikes by dispersing its arsenals, aircraft and air defenses. Conversely, the Russians succeeded in engaging 75% of static defense sites in the first 48 hours of the war.”³⁰

Light infantry units will gain distinct advantages by avoiding detection and targeting on a modern battlefield. Light infantry is uniquely suited for dispersion and maintaining a reduced signature. RUSI's study on Ukraine noted that “survivability is often afforded by being sufficiently dispersed to become an uneconomical target, by moving quickly enough to disrupt the enemy's kill chain and thereby evade engagement, or by entering hardened structures.”³¹ Concealment and camouflage take on new considerations in the modern battlefield. As combat units contend with hiding within the electromagnetic spectrum and masking easily detectable thermal, acoustic, and seismic signatures, the light infantry will gain the advantage for the joint force.

Small light infantry units in Ukraine have found success in frustrating the enemy through their ability to disperse, conceal, and then strike on command. One

study noted, “Roving bands of marauding light infantry act in a similar manner to German U-boat operations during the Battle of the Atlantic.”³² The author described them “as land-based wolfpacks” that could melt among the countryside only “to concentrate to exploit identified opportunities before dispersing once again.”³³

The war in Ukraine also highlights how light infantry can also serve a critical role as first lines of contact to defend against enemy unmanned aircraft systems (UAS). Light infantry units excel in distributed environments that allow them to operate in densities and mass small enough to diminish the likelihood of targeting.³⁴ The use of man-portable stinger missile systems has played a decisive role in defending Ukrainian critical assets from attacks by Russian close air support.³⁵ Man-portable air defense systems will become especially effective against enemy close air support and drones once the U.S. Army develops man-portable air defense systems that can integrate into mobile radars.³⁶

Light infantry thrives in severely restricted terrain, and the modern battlefield is likely to be dominated by cities or among mountains and jungles. Even muddy farm fields can plague mounted operations, as the Russians discovered during the early invasion of Ukraine. Motorized Russian forces quickly found themselves bottlenecked on roads following the thaw in February 2022 as farm fields thawed in Ukraine's *Rasputitsa* (mud season).³⁷ Tracked vehicles equally struggled across the inundated fields of Europe. Consequently, on the outskirts of battlefields like Bakhmut, one can find where enemy “armored vehicles hurtled along a single, narrow access road, [and passed by] ... hulks of blown-up and burned trucks that didn't make it.”³⁸ Russia's challenges with mobility serve as a cautionary tale for U.S. Army infantry units that have become too reliant and beholden to their motorized fleets. Transitioning back to light infantry will best prepare them to fight in restrictive terrain.

One of the most interesting observations to come out of the Ukraine conflict is the dichotomy between Russian and Ukrainian logistics and sustainment systems. RUSI's study assessed, “Ukrainian war stocks survived because they could be rapidly displaced and dispersed. Russian materiel has remained highly vulnerable to long-range fires.”³⁹ The lighter the unit, the less logistics required at the operational level to sustain that fighting element. The study concluded, “The reduction in

the logistical tail and therefore reduced vulnerability of precision systems is perhaps as important as their effect in terms of their superiority to non-precision fires.⁴⁰

Ukraine's reliance on disaggregated lighter units has shown promise for light infantry sustainment being an important factor in future conflict.⁴¹

As the Army transforms for LSCO and doctrinally codifies roles, the light infantry will offer a combination of the subordinate forms of the attack (ambush, counterattack, demonstration, feint, raid, and spoiling attack) in the defense and offense to generate a discontinuous battlefield favorable for subsequent friendly actions.⁴² By frustrating enemy tactical activity and creating multiple dilemmas for the adversary, the light infantry can force the enemy to fight piecemeal and in multiple directions, preventing unity of effort and mass against friendly forces. As the Army further operationalizes MDO to fight and win in LSCO, we can leverage the distinct advantages true light infantry offer given the emerging operational environment.

A Holistic Approach to Light Infantry Modernization

The modernization efforts for long-range precision fires, next-generation combat vehicles, future vertical lift, network, and air and missile defense draw the most attention from scholarly articles and academic dialogue on what will matter for survival and victory on the future battlefield. In this last section, we offer some recommendations for how to take a holistic approach to transforming the light infantry under the Army's six modernization priorities.⁴³

Of the six categories, "soldier lethality" suggests an emphasis on the criticality of light infantry. According to retired Maj. Gen. Bob Scales, the light infantry "receives less than one percent of the total defense department budget allocated to pay for equipment and small unit training."⁴⁴ The modernization priorities can be viewed holistically with light infantry as a critical component to combined arms maneuver in any restrictive and technologically saturated future battlefield. For the light infantry, modernization efforts are cost effective means to amplify inherent capabilities as opposed to separate ends. Therefore, with relatively low cost, the light infantry can provide the joint force with a high return on investment.

Unburdening light infantry tactical formations, redundancy, and simplicity should be part of the Army's

mantra for network modernization efforts. By pulling complexity up to higher echelons of command with more advanced electronic warfare and protection mechanisms, the light infantry can utilize more simple systems to blend in and maintain a low electronic signature in a vulnerable environment. It should continue exploring how to modernize the network based on low-earth-orbit satellite constellations, 5G cellular networks, and small apertures for light infantry formations.

The network should provide intuitive and light-weight soldier-portable radio solutions that are capable of crossbanding. Light infantry should have radios that talk to other formations and coalition partners; bespoke waveforms patented by corporations that deny the light infantry the ability to talk to units outside of their direct command will lead to significant inflexibility.

A widely discontinuous battlefield will require a renewed emphasis on lift capabilities to resupplying light infantry forward or to enable forces to fight while isolated for longer periods of time. Additionally, light infantry casualty evacuation will rely on modernized lift using drone systems because evacuation is anticipated to be more challenging in LSCO while casualty numbers are expected to rise. Without further attention, medical evacuations will become an all-consuming deliberate operation that will prevent light infantry formations from effectively fighting in rugged terrain.

Soldier lethality priorities are generally aligned with light infantry requirements for dismounted capabilities and associated soldier loads. This includes efforts to develop more capable small arms weapons and advancements in the Integrated Visual Augmentation System. However, important exceptions are notably lagging with respect to the U.S. Army's investment in dismounted antiarmor and counter-UAS missile systems for light infantry soldiers.

Current conflicts in Ukraine, Iraq, Syria, the Balkans, and Israel demonstrate modernizing air and missile defense will be paramount for LSCO, especially in anticipation of *offensive* maneuver fights by our ground forces. Currently, the modernization focus remains on defeating larger UAS being employed as one-way attack mechanisms. "Shooting down manned aircraft and large UAVs [unmanned aerial vehicles] is relatively simple, as the Ukrainians have demonstrated. Small and micro-UAVs are a different challenge."⁴⁵ Stingers are not the answer for counter-UAS. We must find ways to integrate small,



A 10th Mountain Division soldier descends an ice-covered cliff at Smugglers' Notch in Jeffersonville, Vermont, 28 January 2017. Soldiers enhanced their mountaineering skills in ice climbing, rappelling, and skiing as part of their annual winter training. (Photo by Tech. Sgt. Sarah Mattison, U.S. Air Force)

dismounted drone interceptor missile systems with the joint force's radars systems for infantrymen to carry at the edge of battle to help protect the rest of the force.

But there is a balance between protection and lethality, and adding equipment often comes at a cost of stalling tempo. U.S. Special Advisory Group-Ukraine

advisors caution against the temptation to weigh down infantry soldiers with too many antidrone and small unmanned aircraft assets on top of their basic gear. The Russian army in Ukraine has made up for stalled tempo by sending mass waves of expendable troops. Small teams of American light infantry forces must preserve tempo by remaining agile and lethal, operating in synchronization with one another against the enemy across the battlefield.

While the U.S. Army doesn't exclusively own the night right now, it still has a distinct advantage. Russians and Ukrainians are generally not fighting during hours of limited visibility. While there are likely a host of reasons for this, one can reasonably conclude that there is a lack of familiarity and possibly availability of night vision equipment. In stark contrast, the U.S. Army promotes a culture of fighting under limited visibility to train, certify, and validate forces. The U.S. Army's distinct ability to fight at night will remain a competitive advantage against its opponents. Fighting and maneuvering at night will enable American light infantry to mass and create a tempo advantage.

The Army's modernization efforts can help find ways to enable, protect, and amplify the effects of light infantry forces in close combat given LSCO realities. These priorities are not *ends* but rather *means* to unleash the full potential of light infantry and what this force can achieve in LSCO. The ability of light infantry moving great distances to seize and strong-point key terrain, conduct ambushes, execute other forms of the attack, and conduct dispersed defensive operations will determine the outcome of a LSCO fight.



California Army National Guard soldiers with Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 185th Armor Regiment, 81st Brigade Combat Team, 40th Infantry Division, prepare to move into the home of suspected insurgents living near Anaconda, Balad Air Base, Salah Ad Din Province, Iraq, 20 August 2004. (Photo by Tech. Sgt. Steve Faulisi, U.S. Air Force)

Conclusion

To prepare for an impending LSCO fight, the Nation and U.S. Army will rely on light infantry to fight in restrictive, austere, and isolated terrain. In preparation, we should first affirm the true meaning of the light infantry and then reframe accordingly on emerging doctrinal and modernization priorities. At the core of the American warfighter ethos is the essence of light infantry. Contemporary conflicts and history reveal the criticality of the light infantry, and current senior leaders understand this better than most.

Gen. Randy A. George, the chief of staff of the Army (CSA), has outlined his four priorities for the force: *warfighting, delivering ready combat formations, continuous transformation, and strengthening the profession.*⁴⁶ Light infantry is inherently suited to adjust to meet the Army's priorities and must remain a key component to the U.S. Army's operational design. But the role of light infantry should be reimagined for LSCO. Our doctrine and equipment should transform to enable the dismounted

soldiers fighting in the next war—the small units infiltrating through swamps and climbing up ridgelines. The ones that will bedevil a larger enemy force and hold key terrain, no matter the conditions. Embracing the importance and versatility of *American* light infantry operationalizes the CSA's vision.

Warfighting is to prepare the force for the LSCO fight in any terrain. The light infantry trains for both the operational environments the U.S. Army will inevitably face and ones that cannot be foreseen. As this article has outlined, the essence of the American warfighter mentality is the tenacity, ingenuity, and disciplined initiative that have long been the hallmarks of our light infantry formations. For the joint force, these light infantry formations become the rapidly deployable forces able to guard key weapon systems, protect critical infrastructure, and secure support zones. For the Army's combined arms team, light infantry will go where other formations cannot go. American light infantry will fight through extreme weather, in the most rugged terrain, and isolated

from their logistics. Warfighting means leveraging the strengths of the Nation's light infantry on the battlefields of the next major conflict.

Delivering ready combat formations means training light infantry for the fight we will have in the future as opposed to the one we had in the past. Light infantry formations must train for the realities of close combat against near-peer adversaries and project, enable, and sustain their forces in LSCO. Delivering ready combat formations is a twofold objective for the light infantry. First, readiness means the light infantry can effectively employ modern technology to achieve its traditional purpose on a modern battlefield. Second, readiness implies true light infantry are prepared to operate in austere environments, on a discontinuous battlefield, and away from traditional lines of communication. Light infantry soldiers must do more than survive in complex terrain; they must be ready to thrive in it and master the terrain for their advantage.

Continuous transformation means finding ways to modernize the Army's ability to maneuver dismounted through rugged and inhospitable terrain. Each modernization objective cannot become an independent end in and of itself or exist to address discreet symptoms or challenges posed by LSCO. Continuous transformation also means aligning emerging doctrine and operationalizing MDO in a manner that leverages true light infantry in a manner that enables the force to fight and win in LSCO.

Strengthen the profession includes continued junior leader development, especially our NCOs, to generate

competent, clever, and cunning American light infantry. Empowered and trusted junior leaders build cohesive, autonomous, and lethal formations. Unlike any other army in the world, the NCOs and junior leaders of the U.S. Army drive American light infantry to be capable of operating with only mission orders and intent. The American light infantry mentality creates effective cohesion through shared hardships in training and in combat when units operate independently and isolated.

American light infantry must continue to empower and trust junior leaders to train for radical autonomy. Small formations become highly lethal, disciplined, and aggressive because of the ownership, autonomy, and dominance of the NCOs that lead them. These NCOs are experts in the technical and tactical application of violence. Furthermore, NCOs train the fit, tough, and cohesive teams modern warfighting requires. These teams are driven by the precept that light infantry isn't just a force structure but a foundational mentality that has assured the Nation's victories throughout history.

Preparing light infantry in the context of the CSA's guidance is not just about each priority in isolation. Rather, it is about providing a pathway to address much of what the U.S. Army wants for the force writ large. Inculcating a true light infantry mentality, foundational to the essence of the American warfighter, will poise the Queen of Battle to support the joint force under all conditions, across any terrain. Most importantly, a true light infantry will be an irreplaceable component to the Army's combined arms team that will fight and win the next major war. ■

Notes

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