



Army long-range surveillance soldiers and an Air Force joint terminal attack controller perform a high-altitude, low-opening jump during the U.S. Air Force Weapons School's Joint Forcible Entry Exercise 14B on 4 December 2014 over the Nevada Test and Training Range at Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada. (Photo by Sr. Airman Thomas Spangler, U.S. Air Force)

Operational Surveillance and Reconnaissance Battalion

Capt. Brian Fitzgerald, U.S. Army

Corps and joint task force commanders require persistent, long-duration surveillance assets to report priority intelligence requirements from denied areas. Three assets are suited to these operations: special operations forces (SOF), unmanned aircraft

systems (UASs), and long-range surveillance (LRS). Commanders have been less inclined to use organic teams from LRS companies, relying more on nonorganic SOF and UASs to collect high-priority information—largely because of the ineffective and outdated organization of

the Army's LRS companies. Due at least in part to this, the Army announced that all LRS companies will be disbanded—no plan to replace the only operational-level surveillance formation has been announced. However, a no-growth reorganization of the Army's LRS units from separate companies to a consolidated battalion would provide corps commanders more effective, responsive, and predictable organic surveillance assets than nonorganic, ad hoc relationships and technology.

Special Operations Forces

Some conventional commanders may view using SOF teams for surveillance as the easiest and most effective answer to their requirements. The SOF "brand" is trusted, taken at face value, and can deliver impressive results. One of the twelve core activities of SOF is special reconnaissance (SR): "reconnaissance and surveillance actions conducted as a special operation in hostile, denied, or diplomatically and/or politically sensitive environments to collect or verify information of strategic or operational significance, employing military capabilities not normally found in conventional forces."¹ Using SOF elements for SR absolves the conventional commander from training oversight of high-risk exercises. Operationally, the chance of compromise, injury, and mission failure can lead commanders to prefer using surveillance elements from outside their organization. SOF bring many assets and operational approaches not found in conventional units. These elements should be a part of corps and joint task force commanders' surveillance options.

Ostensibly, all Special Forces (SF) operational detachments-A (SFODs-A) can conduct SR, and most can infiltrate denied areas. Some have standoff airborne insertion capability. Some SFODs-A have waterborne and small-vehicle capability. The ability of every SFOD-A to conduct SR could create the false impression that abundant manned surveillance capability is available to Army forces. In addition to SF, the Ranger Reconnaissance Company (RRC) expanded from a detachment and increased its capabilities far beyond traditional reconnaissance techniques. During a Joint Readiness Training Center rotation in October 2012, an XVIII Airborne Corps deputy corps commander told the author that in the event of a real war, Army commanders likely would use an RRC team to conduct surveillance behind enemy lines rather than an LRS team.² Teams from the RRC are extremely proficient in military free-fall parachute

insertions and numerous information-collection activities. Their proven results in recent conflicts across the range of military operations indicate that they will continue to be employed at a high operational tempo for the near future. RRC availability to provide dedicated support to conventional operational commanders is uncertain, at best.

Contrary to the perception of abundant manned surveillance capacity, SF already have more missions than resources. In a large-scale conflict, the best SOF SR teams would be aligned with missions of national or strategic priority as they arose. Their employment for those priorities would deprive operational commanders of surveillance assets, as happened in the Falklands Campaign, where British Special Air Service (SAS) teams were promised to the joint commander as an operational reconnaissance resource. They were also dual tasked by the national authority with conducting raids to destroy shore-to-ship missiles. During the campaign, the national authority re-tasked the SAS teams and deprived the joint commander of this asset at critical times.³

Each SOF team has many special skills that it must maintain to a high degree of competency. The teams tasked to prioritize SR would likely support SOF missions. It is unlikely they would be available to provide support to conventional forces for long durations, if at all.

While any SF teams can conduct SR, they may operate at a level of expertise far below mission requirements, as deep reconnaissance missions in Operation Desert Storm demonstrated. For example, Charles Lane Toomey writes that Operational Detachment Alpha 555 conducted SR after training in Kuwait before their mission.⁴ The team's lack of proficiency in interpreting satellite imagery and finding a suitable hide site, overall surveillance plan, and

Capt. Brian Fitzgerald, U.S. Army, was the 1st Battalion (Airborne), 509th Infantry Regiment S-3 operations officer from November 2015 to July 2016. His previous assignments include operations officer of Headquarters and Headquarters Battalion, XVIII Airborne Corps, company command of XVIII Airborne Corps long-range surveillance, and long-range surveillance detachment leader. He has deployed in support of Operations Enduring Freedom, Iraqi Freedom, New Dawn, and Joint Guardian.



other shortfalls in surveillance-specific field craft were mitigated by their contingency planning and luck when they were discovered by civilians. While the LRS teams inserted during this campaign were not compromised, the SF teams were compromised in nearly every case—most by “soft” compromise when their hide sites were discovered by civilians. The SF teams’ specific training in operational surveillance essentially began when they deployed to Kuwait before the conflict. These teams often do not share common communication architecture with conventional forces, nor are they often equipped with modern surveillance equipment. They may report into proprietary networks that are not compatible with conventional force communications.

Often, SOF elements are not well trained in surveillance; instead, their focus is primarily on direct-action, counterterrorism, or unconventional warfare tasks, among others. For these reasons and others, conventional commanders are likely to have a difficult time determining the level of surveillance expertise in SOF units, potentially leading to employment beyond the teams’ true capabilities. The preference to utilize SOF such as SEAL teams over trained conventional

Chief Warrant Officer 2 Dylan Ferguson, a brigade aviation element officer with the 82nd Airborne Division’s 1st Brigade Combat Team, launches a Puma unmanned aerial vehicle 25 June 2012 in the Ghazni Province of Afghanistan. Ferguson uses the Puma to conduct aerial reconnaissance for troops on the ground. (Photo by Sgt. Mike MacLeod, U.S. Army)

reconnaissance is described well in the after-action reports and is illustrated by the SEAL element that was chosen by a conventional commander over a Marine reconnaissance platoon to conduct a surveillance mission in Operation Red Wings in June 2005. Several factors contributed to the tragic outcome, known widely through the book about Marcus Luttrell’s survival.⁵ The Marine element would have taken a different approach. It had proposed to walk into the objective area, rather than to fast-rope, and to provide its own reaction force, rather than rely on a helicopter-borne element from further away. The Marine element had brought significantly more communication capability than the small SEAL element.

Nowhere in doctrine are SOF required to provide conventional commanders an SR capability.

Commanders of conventional forces might assume or be misinformed that SR capability exists in theater but discover later that the capability is not available when needed. To structure Army units with such a large gap in reliable operational surveillance units dedicated to this difficult mission seems shortsighted.

Unmanned Aircraft Systems

The proliferation of UASs, the steady improvement in portability of unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) feeds, and the increase in sensor capability have been significant during the Global War on Terrorism. Live or near-live full-motion video sets the standard for complete reporting from a surveillance asset. UAVs may interdict targets while providing surveillance, and they present low risk to personnel if compromised. Many UASs also provide increased communication with tactical forces as well. UASs are generally able to communicate with every level of a conventional force, making them extremely responsive and helping create a common operational picture. These attributes make results from UASs more predictable than most other surveillance assets and create the perception of a “plug-and-play” capability. Commanders’ reliance on these assets made intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance synonymous with UASs for much of the Global War on Terrorism.

However, aerial assets are often limited by weather and station time. Moreover, their use in the near future at the operational tempo commanders grew to expect in Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom is not sustainable. Commanders could be faced with a reduction in UAS capacity rather than an increase,

according to a 2015 *Washington Post* article.⁶ While the clarity of a UAV video feed can be superior to the radio transmission or still photos of a reconnaissance team, it sometimes provides a false sense of complete information when not integrated with other information collection methods. Drone signatures can present risks to operations, and they can be easily

targeted by forces with even a moderate level of air defense. A UAV often needs to be queued onto a target by assets on the ground as it has a narrow view of the battlefield and is isolated from the events happening on the ground. UASs should be viewed as a powerful augmentation to ground surveillance units, not a replacement for them. Conventional commanders relying on SOF and UASs need to ensure that weather and higher-priority missions do not constrain their organic information collection capability.



Long-range surveillance (LRS) soldiers from the 18th Airborne Corps LRS company certify on the special patrol infiltration and extraction system at Fort Pickett, Virginia, on 23 September 2012 in preparation for assuming the Global Response Force mission. (Photo by Brian Fitzgerald)

Long-Range Surveillance

LRS companies are organic to corps, are focused solely on surveillance, and should be the corps commander's most-trusted information-collection asset.

The companies share the same communication architecture as the command they support. They are designed to provide standoff insertion capability by land, on water, and in the air. An LRS company has a mission-essential task list, which is limited almost exclusively to information collection through surveillance. The LRS teams should be able to provide written reports and still pictures by high frequency or satellite communication from anywhere in the world. The teams are all-weather and can be in position for seventy-two continuous hours without support or up to seven days with deliberate



planning. They can adapt to unforeseen changes in terrain and enemy situation. Recent exercises have demonstrated the ability to provide full-motion video over the horizon from dismounted LRS teams, a complementary and often more persistent capability than aerial platforms. Advances in LRS capabilities have surpassed the legacy voice and still-picture reporting and will remain relevant for the future.

However, Army LRS is poorly organized, making each unit's success entirely personality dependent. Techniques and capabilities are neither universal between companies nor predictable over time as leaders come and go. This limits senior leaders' understanding of LRS and makes the companies unreliable. Surveillance and communication equipment is outdated, and support units are fragmented between the companies, limiting training in support of specialized skills like military free-fall and waterborne insertion. Facilities are spread throughout the Army, increasing cost and redundancy. The separate companies do not have a unifying headquarters to ensure standardization of tactics techniques and procedures, competency of leaders, or relevancy of equipment and training.

U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Eric Zubkus and Australian Defence Force Pvt. James Adams conduct surveillance from behind the mesh net of their hide site 17 July 2011 during Exercise Talisman Sabre at the Shoalwater Bay Training Area, Queensland, Australia. (Photo by Spc. J. P. Lawrence, U.S. Army)

Since 1986, former LRS commanders such as Lt. Col. Isaac Rademacher and others have advocated the consolidation of LRS units.⁷ These commanders identified shortfalls that have not been solved by assigning the LRS companies to military intelligence battalions, cavalry squadrons, or corps headquarters battalions. These shortfalls include a lack of expertise in unit-specific tactics, techniques, and procedures at the battalion and brigade level, lack of adequate support from parachute riggers, and inadequate force structure to support sustained operations. Each commander advocated the establishment of a headquarters above the company level to provide standardization and accountability.

Recommendations

LRS companies are the conventional forces' organic, persistent, and most reliable surveillance capability.

Disbanding LRS removes the last dedicated operational surveillance formation available to corps and joint task force commanders. To more effectively train and employ these units, pathfinder and LRS companies should be consolidated into an operational surveillance-and-reconnaissance battalion (OSRB). A no-growth reorganization of the separate LRS companies to provide consistent results across the Army is required. Companies within an OSRB would maintain their habitual relationship with the parent corps headquarters, but they would be able to task-organize for purposes based on the mission, the threat, and the friendly situation. A battalion composed of LRS companies would deploy detachments rather than teams; standardize tactics, techniques, and procedures; increase by 30 percent the overall number of LRS teams by reorganizing the communication and surveillance sections; and improve rigger support.

LRS should be employed at the detachment level—an improvement from independent teams. As demonstrated by Operation Red Wings, where the entire burden of tactical mission command was placed on a leader conducting surveillance, in small-unit operations the need is acute for tactical mission command by company-grade and noncommissioned officers separate from the actions at the objective.⁸ While many organizations, particularly surveillance units, are designed for employment at the squad- or fire-team level, these units require a mission support site in most cases. This task organization would enable teams to focus on their objectives while the mission support site covered contingencies, long-range communication, and tactical decisions between supporting elements.

While an LRS company is marginally sufficient to train and deploy teams, it is insufficient to do the same for platoon-sized detachments. The Army requires battalion commanders to certify that platoons are prepared for operations. LRS detachments require a battalion headquarters to certify their expertise in sophisticated communication, high-risk infiltration, and surveillance techniques. Having established a qualified battalion, employment of LRS elements should be modified to enable the detachment headquarters' role as a mission support site, better mitigating operational risk.

Lack of organic fire support and the reduction of end strength weigh heavily against LRS employment. According to the Force Management System website table of organization, LRS companies were reduced from

a 139-person formation to a 100-person formation (30 percent) as the battlefield surveillance brigades disbanded in 2014 and 2015.⁹ The reorganization also removed LRS fire support and tactical air-control party support. An OSRB would enable the battalion to harvest positions from the pathfinder companies to form a dedicated liaison officer team to each company, a role currently filled by the communications soldiers and leaders pulled from other detachments within the company. With liaison support, the LRS company should assign the communication soldiers to the surveillance teams. This would add three surveillance teams to each company, for a total of twelve, and increase the communications capability within each team. This would also preclude the requirement to form ad hoc liaison support from surveillance teams. Creating an OSRB would increase the number of surveillance teams available from eighteen to thirty-six across the active component and return fires and tactical-aircraft control-party support to the LRS without an increase in end strength.

Organizing the Reconnaissance and Surveillance Leaders Course under the battalion headquarters would enable LRS and pathfinder personnel to be properly trained, save money, and ensure the battalion's unique capabilities were maintained to the highest standard. This organization would also provide continuity to the battalion, keeping the units at a high level of proficiency rather than relying on specific personalities to ensure success.

Currently, each LRS company has a nine-rigger detachment that provides direct support for static-line, military free-fall, and airborne resupply operations. This is an insufficient number of riggers to pack the two hundred plus parachutes required to certify a detachment for military free-fall operations. Consolidation of the rigger detachments into a single company in an OSRB would enable a surge to cover intense training cycles instead of requiring jumpers to pack their own parachutes. This consolidation would further reduce the cost of maintaining three separate oxygen rooms, shakeout towers, and parachute storage facilities. Oversight of the military free-fall program would be safer and more effective, providing two levels of qualified headquarters above the rigger detachment (a rigger company and an OSRB headquarters). This battalion headquarters would understand the capabilities and limitations of the systems and the personnel. The OSRB would provide continuity in high-risk

airborne operations and other tactics, techniques, and procedures, improving safety and capability.

Currently, three pathfinder companies are assigned to combat aviation brigades in the XVIII Airborne Corps. They are typically tasked with downed aircraft recovery team or protective security detachment missions. Because pathfinder and LRS units are similar, the U.S. Army Infantry School merged the mission-essential tasks during previous efforts to form combined LRS and pathfinder units. While pathfinder elements are not capable of operational surveillance missions because they lack sophisticated communication and training, pathfinder platoons do have an extensive reconnaissance capability. Employed as a platoon-sized force, they are well suited to dismounted reconnaissance missions, rapidly securing downed aircraft sites, assisting in the recovery of LRS teams, and providing security in austere environments as part of stability operations. These capabilities would be better employed by consolidating the companies and aligning a pathfinder platoon each to I Corps, III Corps, and XVIII Corps through habitual relationships.

An OSRB is a no-growth proposal to realize fully the information collection contribution LRS and pathfinder

elements can provide. By combining these separate companies, shifting redundant resources within these formations to better support this mission, and re-aligning the companies to better train on specialized skills, the Army will gain a more capable conventional force dedicated to supporting operational-level leaders. These elements have progressed far beyond the days of voice and still-picture reports, and can leverage technology and techniques to increase situational awareness and understanding. Mobility improvements have greatly reduced risk and increased responsiveness both during and after insertion. Lightweight global communication and full-motion video increase the reliability and quality of product delivered. Unity of effort across the Army is needed to realize more than temporary and personality-dependent application of these improvements. The Army's decision to disband these companies and save six hundred positions in exchange for the only dedicated surveillance formation is not a good trade. An OSRB would use Army systems and lessons learned to ensure that LRS and pathfinder companies provide the capability that joint and corps commanders require. ■

Notes

1. Joint Publication 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 8 November 2010, as amended through 15 February 2016), 222, accessed 8 September 2016, http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp1_02.pdf.

2. Name withheld, discussion with the author, 9 October 2012.

3. Lawrence Freedman, *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign*, vol. 2: *War and Diplomacy* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2005), 735.

4. Charles Lane Toomey, *XVIII Airborne Corps in Desert Storm: From Planning to Victory* (Ashland, OR: Hellgate Press, 2004), 299.

5. Marcus Luttrell with Patrick Robinson, *Lone Survivor: The Eyewitness Account of Operation Redwing and the Lost Heroes of SEAL Team 10* (New York: Little, Brown, 2007), 247; Ed Darack, *Victory Point* (New York: The Berkley Group, 2009), 161.

6. Missy Ryan, "Air Force Struggles to Keep Pace with Explosion in the Use of Combat Drones," *Washington Post*, 17 June 2015, accessed 17 August 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/air-force-struggles-to-keep-pace-with-explosion-in-the-use-of-combat-drones/2015/06/17/5c16213c-14a3-11e5-9518-f9e0a8959f32_story.html; Thomas Doherty, "Intelligence Surveillance Reconnaissance is Greater Than Aerial Surveillance," *Small Wars Journal* website, 18 February 2014, accessed 17 August 2016, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/intelligence-surveillance-reconnaissance-is-greater-than-aerial-surveillance>.

7. Isaac J. Rademacher, "Advancing the Capability of Long-Range Surveillance Units" (thesis, Naval War College, 2012), 14; see also David P. Anders, "Long-Range Surveillance Unit Application in Joint Vision 2010" (thesis, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College [USA CGSC], 1999); Lewis C. Cochran, "Human Intelligence: Long-Range Surveillance for FORCE XXI" (thesis, USA CGSC, 1996); Valery C. Keaveny, "Ensuring the Continued Relevance of Long Range Surveillance Units" (thesis, USA CGSC, 1989); Michael M. Larsen, "Organizational Structure for Deep Ground Reconnaissance for Future Divisions and Corps" (thesis, USA CGSC, 2006); Mark R. Meadows, "Long-Range Surveillance Force Structure in FORCE XXII" (thesis, USA CGSC, 2000).

8. Luttrell, *Lone Survivor*, 247. Luttrell documents how his four-man SEAL team relied on standard operating procedures better suited to direct action missions (such as cutting the fast-rope on insertion), minimal communication equipment, and a single co-located team. Ed Darack, "Operation Red Wings: What Really Happened?" *The Marine Corps Gazette* (January 2011): 62, accessed 14 November 2016, <https://www.mca-marines.org/gazette/2011/01/operation-red-wings> (subscription required). Darack describes the unused plan of the Marine reconnaissance platoon, which included a larger element and more robust communications.

9. Force Management System website, accessed 16 November 2016, <https://fmsweb.army.mil/> (CAC required).