



U.S. Army Soldiers, assigned to 19th Special Forces Group (Airborne), conduct urban combat training during a Special Forces Advanced Urban Combat course near Camp Williams, Utah, Nov. 12, 2020. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Jake Cox)

Irregular Warfare

A Leadership Challenge

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War is often thought of in the traditional large force-on-force style of conflict – with famous battles of World War I, World War II, and the Korean War often at the forefront. Yet Irregular Warfare (IW) is a different kind of conflict that intensified in the last few decades with the wars in the Middle East. This article examines the challenges associated with IW, to include leader development and necessary changes, unit recognition and mitiga-

tion of high stress levels, and creating a shared understanding between allied nations to increase buy-in and mission success.

Irregular Warfare

Although IW has been around since the beginning of warfare, it has only recently been defined in doctrine. The Department of Defense (2013) defines IW as:

“Characterized as a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy & influence over the relative population(s)... In IW, a less powerful adversary seeks to disrupt or negate the military capabilities and advantages of a more powerful military force, which usually serves that nation’s established government.” (p. 1-6)

In simple terms, IW is primarily characterized by smaller, less powerful forces engaging a larger, more powerful force. Typically, these means engagements are not of the traditional force-on-force nature and involve skirmishes, guerrilla warfare, population influence, social disruption, and clandestine operations (Department of Defense, 2013). The complex and unpredictable nature of IW requires military leaders to modify their behaviors and attributes to ensure organizational success.

Attributes

The Army Leadership Requirements Model lays out the attributes and competencies expected of every Army leader – character, presence, and intellect (Department of the Army, 2019a). These attributes often reflect personal experience and long-term development and are not immediately gained from direct training events. At the organizational level, they directly relate to how a leader behaves, influences organizational change, and guides the unit through obstacles and setbacks. Since IW usually results in protracted and unpredictable conflicts, leader attributes must be adjusted to ensure maximum organization support and mission accomplishment.

The uncertain nature of IW forces leaders to adapt their leadership to complex situations. As a result, leaders typically develop a more flexible and integrative approach to leadership instead of a decisive



A U.S. Army Soldier assigned to the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School low crawls under barbed wire during Psychological Operations Assessment and Selection at Camp Mackall, North Carolina March 1, 2021. (U.S. Army photo by K. Kassens)

and hierarchic approach. Ultimately these leaders are viewed as creative, social, and responsive – all qualities necessary to build a relationship of trust and mission command (Brousseau et al., 2006; Department of the Army, 2019b).

Retired U.S. Army Gen. David Petraeus’s leadership in Mosul during Operation Iraqi Freedom is an example of this necessary paradigm shift. Petraeus, faced with an IW situation, was forced to quickly adapt and develop strategies positively affecting American forces in northern Iraq. Yet just as crucial as his ability to adapt to this new manner of war, was the effort he put into developing subordinate leaders (Lundberg et al., 2006).

Leader and organizational development must continue during IW, especially because of the fluidity and speed of operations. Therefore, leaders must adjust their perspectives and attributes to ensure maintenance of the five development tenets outlined in *Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22: Army Leadership and the Profession* (2019a).

Stress Management

Stress can often provide motivation to accomplish tasks, trigger immune system activity, and is an integral part of the fight-or-flight response. However, too much stress, especially over a long period of time, can severely impact Soldiers or units. Stress management techniques can mitigate the challenges imposed by stressful events.

Observant leaders recognize and mitigate stress as Soldiers begin to show adverse signs of stress influence. For example, prolonged direct engagement with the enemy, battlefield injuries, and exposure to death manifest in varying ways. Soldiers may exhibit trembling, flinching, anxiety, and nightmares. Furthermore, the operational stressors of the environment, quality of life, or separation from friends and family may result in the same types of stress responses (Department of the Army, 2016).

Leaders can plan for and mitigate these reactions by creating an adaptive stress reaction environment. Adaptive stress management is generally understood to involve horizontal bonding between peers in a military unit, vertical bonding between leaders and subordinates, esprit de corps and identification with the unit and its history, and unit cohesion developed through trust and shared success (Department of the Army, 2016). Creating a shared understanding across the organization that Soldier health is important is paramount to creating a positive adaptive stress reaction environment.

Sleep

One of the most effective methods for managing stress is mastering the performance triad of sleep, activity, and nutrition (Department of the Army, 2016). Managing the triad will significantly improve an organization’s performance and help keep Soldiers healthy and mission-ready.

Sleep, activity, and nutrition are all controllable and influenced by leader decisions and oversight. However, sleep is arguably the most critical aspect of the triad. It is the biological equivalent of a reset switch and allows the mind to process and deal with events (Department of the Army, 2016). Leaders must take an active role in ensuring Soldiers are afforded adequate time to sleep, even in high operational tempo environments. Additionally, managing sleep time, duration, and environment will allow Soldiers and organizations to be mission-ready when operations require them to engage in complex tasks (Department of the Army, 2016).

Shared Understanding

A local population plays a crucial role in military operations' success or failure. Because IW is complex and atypical, it often relies on unified action partners with whom the U.S. military must build a shared understanding. This understanding must be as inclusive as possible to build relationships of trust.

Petraeus demonstrated the creation of shared understanding in Mosul, Iraq, when he unified allied countries,

the Iraqi population, and the American military. He created an environment where all allied actors participated in IW operations in his area of responsibility. Allied militaries were involved in the planning processes and he informed local governments of the 'why' behind those actions.

Finally, Petraeus and allied leaders gave subordinate commanders insight into what each action aimed to achieve relaying a commander's intent in the mission command philosophy. Each of these actions strengthened the U.S. the region and enabled a return to normalcy in trade and infrastructure for the Iraqi population, improving relationships and operational outcomes (Lundberg et al., 2006).

Conclusion

Irregular warfare will continue to be a part of military operations well into the future. As a result of IW, and its continued use by both state and nonstate actors, leaders at all echelons must understand the effects that it will have on their organizations and the best practices to prepare for it. By doing so, the U.S. Army will build positive relationships and better share the responsibilities of global defense. ■

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