

PREPAREDNESS OF THE U.S. MILITARY DURING KOREA AND VIETNAM

Preparedness of the U.S. Military during Korea and Vietnam

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## Abstract

It has always been problematic for the U.S. military to be prepared for the onset of hostilities. It is not difficult if you know where the threat is coming from, but when you are faced with multiple threats on multiple fronts, where do you focus? This essay will focus on the beginnings of the Korean and Vietnam wars. Ultimately, you will see that the U.S. Military was not prepared for combat when they were initially called upon.

Is the United States military, particularly the U.S. Army, a reactionary force or is it a combat force that is always ready for its primary mission? This is a debateable question and throughout history arguments have been made that support both sides. Some say that yes, we are a reactionary force. History proves that the military is often unprepared for our enemy in some facet. Others argue that our military is not reactionary, that we train and prepare for what we perceive is our largest threat. How do you overcome this? Do you try to prepare for all threats so that you are able to perform a multitude of missions adequately? Or do you prepare for the greatest threat and have the ability to perform only one mission very well? I will examine two cases throughout this essay. The first case is Task Force Smith and the 24<sup>th</sup> Division in Korea, and the second is The 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry and the Ia Drang Valley. These cases show that we, the U.S. military, was not ready at the onset of hostilities in Korea and Vietnam. Additionally, I will look at the NCOs role in preparing their troops for combat operations. Ultimately, we will determine if the U.S. Army has been able to conquer their past history and is now able to achieve force readiness before combat operations commence.

Charles B. Smith was the commander of Task Force Smith. Smith was also a veteran of the Pearl Harbor attack in 1941. Being a veteran of World War II, Smith was able to ascertain that his unit not prepared for war. Why was his unit unprepared for combat? Was it Smith's own fault? Or was blame to lie elsewhere? First we will look at what became of the U.S. Army after World War II that affected their readiness.

Post World War II, the Army had downsized. It still maintained a ten-division structure, but it eliminated units that are vital for sustained combat. The authorized peacetime strength of the four divisions in Japan was 12,500 and three of the divisions were understrength, which included the 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division with only 10,700 men. Authorized wartime strength was

18,900. Junior officers and most NCOs were combat proven, but the other ranks consisted of mostly young soldiers that joined the Army for the generous GI Bill and low-interest loans. They also had the expected “hard cases” that frequently spent time in the stockade. This was an Army that did not expect to go to war. This was the 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division that would soon be facing an enemy with approximately 80,000 men and 100 to 150 tanks. In the spring of 1949, the 24<sup>th</sup>'s primary mission was to occupy Japan, with a secondary mission of training. This changed with the command of Lt. Gen Walton H. Walker. Training for combat became the primary mission with occupational duties being secondary. However, there was a lack of training areas in Japan. Japan was a very populous area and units were unable to conduct effective combined-arms training, thus affecting important working relationships important in combat such as standard operating procedures, fire support, resupply techniques and ammunition handling. In addition, the equipment was old and worn. Units were lacking machine guns, to include spare barrels and tripods, antitank guns, 57mm recoilless rifles and many radios. LTC Smith was not the reason that his unit was unprepared for combat. There was a lack of training areas, a shortage of equipment and an Army that believed that war was unlikely.

As stated above, the Army had combat experienced officers and NCOs in the ranks at the onset of Korea, however, that only amounted to about one-sixth of the Soldiers in Task Force Smith. Fact is, most senior NCOs stood their ground and fought. Some of the younger Soldiers, not trained for combat, ran leaving their dead, wounded, weapons and equipment behind. The senior NCOs did train their Soldiers. However, lack of training areas to conduct combined-arms exercises, distractions of a Garrison Army and inadequate equipment, the training fell short.

The first large scale battle of the Vietnam War involved the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division (Airmobile) and took place in the fall of 1965 in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam. It was

an unusually bloody and savage battle, which ended with a U.S. victory. However, the U.S. military was ill prepared for this war.

When the Vietnam War began, the U.S. Military was in a high state of readiness. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara had increased the overall strength of the Army to almost a million strong, stockpiled large quantities of equipment and increased airlift capacity by 400 percent. There were also changes in doctrine. The new doctrine was more defensive, assuming the defense of Europe. The main change was taking and holding territory was no longer the object, rather the focus was on destroying the enemy. Along with this doctrine change came new equipment that vastly increased the firepower and mobility of the military. The most controversial piece of equipment was the rifle of the foot soldier. Initially it was the M14, a weapon designed for the open battlefields of Europe and was very accurate at long ranges. However in Vietnam, where much of the fighting was at close range, it's flaws became more obvious. It was heavy, had a bad kick in automatic and was difficult to aim. Early in Vietnam, the M14 was consistently outperformed by the AK47. The experimental version of the M16, the AR14, had excellent results in both testing and actual combat in Vietnam. The modifications that the Army added made the weapon unreliable by jamming. This sparked enough controversy to warrant a congressional investigation. The transition from peace to limited war proved troublesome for the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry. The assumption was that the reserves would be mobilized and that enlistments would be extended. President Johnson did not take these steps. When the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry was deployed, it did so without approximately 2,700 of it's troops because they were ineligible for overseas service. Personnel had to be brought in from other units and the result was a lack of training that was not absolutely essential. They received hurried instruction on the M16 and last minute instruction on tactics used by the Viet Cong. All of the above shows that the

Military, specifically the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry, was unprepared for Vietnam. What is the reason for the success of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division? My stance is that the success was a result of good NCOs and strong leadership.

What role did the NCO play in preparing the soldiers of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division for combat in the Ia Drang Valley? First, was discipline and teamwork. This created an almost family atmosphere and taught the soldiers to stand and fight at all costs. Second, they prepared their soldiers by preparing them for other duties in other disciplines. Third, they taught their soldiers that mission accomplishment always comes first. Lastly, they prepared their soldiers by having realistic and stressful training.

#### Conclusion

Is the U.S. military ready for combat. Absolutely. The U.S. Military is the most technologically advance force in the world. Is the U.S. Military prepared for all battles? Sadly, no. There are too many threats at too many levels to achieve force readiness at all fronts. The best we can do is to continue to provide realistic training at as many fronts as possible. My belief, is that we will always be a reactionary force to some extent. That does not mean that we are not ready or prepared for combat, but that we must continually refine our priorities.

## References

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