

Has the US Military Overcome Its Obstacles to Achieve Force Readiness?

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Force Readiness for the Future

The US military has made many improvements in force readiness since 1775. Every war is different from the last and each lesson learned does not always translate into success at the beginning of the next war. As the cliché goes, history repeats itself. In *America's First Battles 1776-1965* (1986), Heller (1986) examines all the first battles or campaigns in American's wars. Two modern wars that will help influence force readiness improvements are World War II and the Vietnam War. The first major battle where US fought Germans during World War II was the battle of Kasserine Pass during January 30 to 22 February 1943 (Heller, 1986). The first major battle where US fought Germans during the Vietnam War was the Ia Drang Valley campaign 18 October to 24 November 1965. Costly mistakes were made because the military force was not ready in one way or another. Doctrine, training, leadership, planning, intelligence and equipment are some of the factors that affect force readiness.

Doctrine

At the end of the War to End All Wars, no one thought that another world war would ever happen again. At that time, the US military would greatly scale down its troop strength and remain that way for years. No one was thinking about improving doctrine or developing new doctrine. When World War II began in September 1939, the US was already behind in readiness. Although the US would not enter World War II for another two years, it still did not have time to develop doctrine to fight the next war. During the Battle of Kasserine Pass, the US military suffered greatly because of the lack of doctrine. Tank destroyers were introduced but the “creators of the tank destroyer concept formulated their doctrine with an imperfect understanding

of combined arms mechanized warfare” (Gabel, 1985, p 1-2). Close air support doctrine did not exist and ground commanders would accuse the air commanders of lack of support (Kelley, 2002). In addition, combined arms fighting were not how soldiers were trained. The 1st Armored Division never trained with the infantry or the artillery. Because of the lack of armored vehicles, the unit spent most of the time house cleaning around post (Kelley, 2002). During the battle of Ia Drang, helicopters were used in battle for the first time for more than simply moving troops. The 1st Cavalry Division “used them for all aspect of battle – reconnaissance, air attack, transport, and logistic support” (Pimlott, 1999, p 48). The doctrinal use of helicopters would evolve as the Vietnam War waged war. During the ambush of 2/7 Calvary, the strategy of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) was to strike into the American column to break it into pieces which they hope will help prevent artillery fire. The NVA was able to accomplish this so that “the fight thus turned into a series of platoon and squad actions with none of the units able to assist the others” (Ukeiley, 1998, 41). For the US military, the “reliance was placed on supportive fire rather than light infantry tactics” (Ukeiley, 1998, 41).

Training

During the Battle of Kasserine Pass, soldiers were not fully trained when they were sent overseas. Anti-tank mines were not always buried or emplaced properly (Atkinson, 2002). The cause could stem from lack of leadership, tools or training. Anti-tank rockets or bazookas were also issued in theater for the first time but “no one really knew how to operate and employ them” and were not used for this battle (Heller, 1986, p 236). A full regiment of combat engineers had failed to complete rifle training due to the speed of deploying overseas (Atkinson, 2002). The US military also started to use war games on a combined arms scale but only after the first two

divisions deployed and so these divisions did not get that type of training. During the battle of the Ia Drang Valley, soldiers were getting M16s only 10 days prior to deployment.

Poor Leadership

During the Battle of Kasserine Pass, poor leadership reigned. The example come from as low as the squad leader and platoon leader to the corps commander. One reason for this stemmed from the lack of professional development for both officers and noncommissioned officers. In addition, the poorly equipped, poorly funded, and under strength military didn't allow for actual command of units larger than company size. The inexperience at the general officer level was worst of all. Based mostly from peacetime army, general officers whom several were in their late 50s, didn't have much battle experience, including field exercises and command post exercises. Marshall Joffre once said that "it takes 16,000 men to train a major general" and for the II Corps commander, Lieutenant General Fredenall, it took 6,000 (Whitley, 2003, p. 186). It was just inexperience. Several poor judgments were also made. General Fredenall never came to the front lines to personally witness what was happening. His headquarters, as far as 80 miles to the rear, was "excessively" defended. Critical information was not passed down in a timely manner. Junior officers and NCOs were not taking charge of panicked troops. Another issue is the chain of command. There was a perception problem of who was in charge as orders came that were conflicting and confusing (Kelly, 2002, 149). American were fighting with and sometimes for the British. The 1st Armored Division was essentially broken up into four combat commands and sent to different units, some served under other Americans, some served under British command and others served with the French (Kelly, 2002, 108). This confusion caused problems when particularly when the Germans started to attack.

During the Battle of Ia Drang Valley, there were some leadership mistakes that could have been avoided. At the opening of the fight at Landing Zone (LZ) X-Ray, a platoon from B company of 2/7 Cavalry, led by LT Herrick, overextending themselves and was quickly surrounded. Of a platoon of 27, eight were killed and 12 were wounded. Although the platoon was never overwhelmed, they were isolated and in desperate need of rescue. Some have considered his actions rash, reckless and amateurish (Hymel, 1998). On a larger scale, the battalions of 2/7 Cavalry and 2/5 Cavalry were sent in on foot to relieve their sister battalion 1/7. The unit was on alert for over 52 hours with little sleep (Moore & Galloway, 1992, 218). After relieving 1/7, 2/5 and 2/7 were ordered to march to LZ Columbus and LZ Albany respectively to search for the elusive enemy. Tired soldiers marched on frequently dumping their gear to lighten their load. Colonel Brown, brigade commander, didn't pass on specifics for the mission. 2/7's commander admits "We had no idea what to expect out there. They told me to go to a place called Albany and establish an LZ; nobody said we would have to fight our way to that LZ, just go and establish it" (Ukeiley, 1998, 41). What was supposed to be a tactical move resembled something more like an administrative move (Ukeiley, 1998, 42). Lapse in security, exhaustion, no intelligence on the enemy, poor junior leadership and vague mission statements contributed to a successful deadly NVA ambush resulting in 151 Americans killed in action and 121 wounded in action. Just before reaching LZ Albany, 2 NVA soldiers were captured. No one from 2/7 had seen a live NVA soldier before and the leadership ended up bunching up around the prisoners which is precisely when the NVA initiated their ambush thus leaving units without their leadership (Moore & Galloway, 1992, 224-227). Colonel Brown also had some failures on his part. While overhead in a helicopter, Col. Brown took too long to decide what to do and put it

into action. Fire support did not start until almost 20 minutes into the fight (Ukeiley, 1998, 42). Col Brown brought in reinforcement “too little too late” (Moore & Galloway, 1992, 247).

Intelligence

Intelligence has always been the key to victory and such failures often leads to disaster. During Operation Torch, the American landing at north Africa, no one can be sure whether the French, especially the Vichy government would be the enemy or an ally. Through American covert operations, the US tried to get the French resistance to align the Vichy government with American landing with mixed results. At the battle of Kasserine Pass, the German strength and position were basically unknown. Pleas for aerial photographs never came even though pilots verbally report of large enemy formations (Kelly, 2002, 180). Additionally, despite the Americans having captured a German Enigma encrypting machine without the German’s knowledge, most information on German plans and intentions did not get passed down to the commanders on the battlefield (Kelly, 2002, 180). Because not all Ultra messages were decrypted, much less passed on, Ultra messages proved misleading. Messages discussing Rommel’s decision not to attack Tebessa with only 52 German and 17 Italian tanks with Kesselring show weaknesses in the German army. The part that was not decrypted was Rommel’s request for two armored divisions (Atkinson, 2002, 359-360) to press on the attack.

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