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America's First Battles

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Four root factors have repeatedly contributed to the unpreparedness of the United States military for its primary mission at the outbreak of hostilities.

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Abstract

How the Army prepares in peacetime, mobilizes for war, fights its first battle, and then adapts to the demand of conflict makes every first battle unique. History has shown that the United States Army has been repeatedly unprepared for the outbreak of hostilities. Traditionally the major reasons advanced for the Army's unpreparedness is politics. But other underlying factors such as command and control, combat experience and preparedness itself have contributing influences on the first battle. And the need to examine these factors has never been more compelling than today as America faces a 21st century full of uncertainty, unpredictability, misinformation and misconceptions.

America's First Battles

The world today is full of uncertainty and has become more dangerous than ever for its inhabitants. With little warning, the United States Army must be capable of fighting across a full spectrum of operations to enforce national policy. Often these missions are challenging, fighting in different geographical locations against a single aggressor or a coalition of aggressors. The 21st century warfare has produced even greater challenges. Today's fight is asymmetrical, conducted on a non-linear battlefield defined by insurgencies, radical idealism and a foe that is willing to use any means to accomplish its goals.

However, history has shown us that the United States Army is repeatedly unprepared to fight its first battles. The theme of *America's First Battles*, a book written by Charles E. Heller and William A. Scofft, is how and why the Army has been unprepared to execute its primary mission at the outbreak of hostilities. In the first ten battles, the Army has suffered five defeats and won five victories (Heller & Stofft, 1986). Four of those defeats were costly in terms of human sacrifice, some would argue too costly for the gains achieved. Of these first ten battles, the primary focus of this paper is two battles fought in the defense. The delay and withdraw of Task Force Smith during the Korean War and Ia Drang, the first conflict that shaped the Vietnam war.

Four reoccurring root causes have contributed to the Army's unpreparedness during the first battles. The first and most glaring is the weakness of command and control. Second is the lack of recent combat experience. Politics and political circumstances have the third major effect on first battles while unpreparedness is the fourth and final theme.

Task Force Smith

When the North Koreans crossed the demilitarized zone established by the Americans and Soviets in 1945, it started a war that ended where it began, the 45th parallel. President Truman felt the need to intervene and halt such aggression as one major South Korean city after another fell to the North Koreans. General MacArthur assessed the situation, determining that both air and land forces would be needed to stop the invasion. Under these conditions LTC Smith, commander Task Force Smith, received hasty orders and an impossible mission

With the hasty order “head for Taejon and stop the North Koreans as far north as possible” (Heller & Stofft, 1986) by General Dean, commander of the 24th infantry division, command and control along with commander’s intent was lost. To complicate the mission further, BG Church was Gen MacArthur’s advance party commander in Korea said that the Task force was to provide the Republic of Korea soldiers a boost of confidence. BG Church even had intelligence knowledge of what Task Force Smith was to face. Why he thought two American rifle companies could stop a multi-divisional attack is unknown. When LTC Smith arrived in Korea, he received no field order, enemy situation report or concept of support. However LTC Smith assumed he could conduct a meaningful and determined defense. He gave a textbook defense operations order to his unit based on current doctrine. NCOs prepared emplacements, laid communication wire and were ready for a standard defensive fight as trained for. This demonstrates the lack of command and control from the headquarters staffs all the way down to the commander himself. Relieved himself for failing to give and enforce clear orders to commanders, General MacArthur left the battlefield humiliated.

Combat experience or lack of is a more acute problem due to the size and structure of the prewar Army, and thus prewar experience of senior commanders and staff officers are dictated

by peacetime needs, not wartime probabilities. Both sides bring expectations, predictions and preparations to the first battle, but the outcome usually differs due to the violent shock of armed combat (Heller & Stofft, 1986). The lack of senior staff and combatant commander's experience to control large land forces is more devastating to the overall war. It is easy to replace battle weary troops and units', however replacing staffs is harder. Interviews with Soldiers from Task Force Smith talk about being led by non-commissioned officers who knew their job. Surrounded and alone on an isolated hill in Korea, under heavy mortar and artillery fire, taking casualties to heavy machine guns it could not engage, Task Force Smith remained under firm discipline by non-commissioned officers.

Politics played a role in Task Force Smith's defeat. General public opinion shaped policies and led to a hasty drawdown of America's Army after World War II. The Army had slipped into an army of occupation. Specifically, the 24th division occupied Japan and lost its wartime focus with a lack of an ever-present enemy that confronted occupation forces in Germany. With President Truman's decision to stop worldwide communist aggression, Korea was the perfect battleground to take a stance. This rapid decision led to the deployment of Task Force Smith. The deployment defined by what it could fit onto airplanes, and not by mission, deployed with only ten percent equivalency of a Regimental Combat Team.

Ia Drang

The U.S. Army was looking for a fight and found one on 14 November, 1965. The valley of Ia Drang was the first battle of Vietnam in which the U.S. Army fought a large scale North Vietnamese unit. It pitted the 32nd, 33rd, and 66th North Vietnamese regiments against a newly formed 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile). Each side inflicted heavy losses in savage, close

quarter fighting with both sides claiming a victory that day. The idea to test the 1st Cavalry Division led to the U.S. Army's first battle of Vietnam.

Command and control problems also plagued the battle of Ia Drang. While it was less evident at the lower levels of command, evidence shows again that higher up the chain of command could have done better. The decision to place 2nd Battalion, 1st Cavalry Division in the valley of Ia Drang to conduct offensive operations put a battalion up against three NVA regiments. Higher headquarters failed to articulate intelligence reports to the battalion. The offensive operation quickly turned into a defensive operation within minutes. After the insertion, the C2 systems used for command and control ceased to command and failed to impose a will on the enemy. There was no follow-on concept to destroy the remaining NVA forces. Fortunately, Ia Drang shows us that a well disciplined unit led by competent NCOs who enforce standards pays off in the confusion of battle.

Harold G. Moore said “among my sergeants there were three-war men - veterans who parachuted into Normandy on D day and had survived the war in Korea. These old veterans were even shocked at the savagery and hellish noise of this battle” (Moore & Galloway, 1992). Demonstrated is the lack of recent combat that can affect the outcome of a first battle. These NCOs still saved the battle with extraordinary courage and selfless service. No one was more important to the NCO than the Soldier to the left or right of them during the battle of Ia Drang.

No other war has politics affected the first battle more than at Ia Drang. Initial perceptions that no piss-ant country like Vietnam could be a match for superior American forces soon faded. Military planners based their plans on battle field victory to be achieved by force of arms. The goals of President Johnson and congress were to pressure the North Vietnamese into accepting a negotiated settlement and accept a sovereign South Vietnam. Since the hands off

approach of sending advisors did not work as deterrence, a demonstration of force would do the trick.

In the decade between the Korean and Vietnam wars the development of nuclear deterrence as military doctrine as a way to fight a war. The reliance on nuclear deterrence and nuclear victory presented serious problems for non-nuclear forces. Not until the Kennedy administration won the election in 1961 that preparedness of conventional forces moved to the fore front. In five years the Army had rapidly expanded from eleven combat divisions to sixteen and new words like counterinsurgency, brush-fire wars and Special Forces had emerged. However, this new strategic approach to contain communism left conventional forces unprepared and untested to fight. The 2nd battalion 1st Cavalry Divisions NCOs at Fort Benning trained hard and tested the capabilities of this new doctrine, conducting extensive exercises at battalion level and below. The only test left was actual battle.

Opposing View

Many argue that Task Force Smith was ready to fight. Task Force Smiths design was by what it could fit on the airlift capabilities available at the time and not for the fight it was about to undertake. Anti-tank mines and tanks were available, but the airplanes did not have the ability to lift them. It is well known that the remainder of the task force arrived by boat and met up with Task Force Smith three days later in Pusan, Korea and could have easily accommodated tanks and anti-tank mines.

Many argue that the 1st Cavalry Division was also ready for a fight. However, the Army had undertaken the new doctrine of air mobility and had never been battle tested. Harold Moore's battalion did train hard on offensive air mobility operations, not for the defense which it

found itself in immediately after landing. The only thing that really saved the 1st Cavalry Division was air and field artillery superiority.

Conclusion

The U.S. military of today has learned from its fundamental obstacles of the past to achieve force readiness at the outbreak of hostilities. It has taken almost two hundred years to shed the hindrances of command and control, combat experience, politics and unpreparedness. Today's Army has state of the art equipment and technology. It is currently fighting a war that is longer than any in its history, giving unprecedented combat experience. Professional NCOs of today do not accept complacency and train aggressively for the uncertainty of 21st century warfare. It is the warrior and the noncommissioned officers who, even when inadequately armed or trained, are readier for war than the officers who lead them. In the end, the arrows drawn on a chart in a headquarters that represents young men and woman who will never become grandfathers of grandmothers, simply because leaders fail in the preparation for battle.

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