

A Few Thoughts on the Evolution of Infantry: Past, Present, Future

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Reminiscences and observations

Number 1

During the Seven Years War a young, handsome and daring cavalryman in the Prussian Army was observed taking sexual liberties with his beautiful mare. This indiscretion was brought to the attention of King Frederic II. Advisors fretted as to what would become of the army as a fighting force, and of war in general, if such behavior were to spread across all ranks of mounted personnel. Many expected the king would have this deed punished in the most draconian manner. Frederic decided otherwise and simply ordered : ***“Transfer that chap to the infantry!”***

This royal order can only be fully appreciated if some background information is taken into account, as follows:

- The king was very fond of young and handsome men.
- During the Seven Years War good soldiers were an increasingly scarce commodity, especially in Prussia, and had to be carefully conserved for battle.
- Cavalry enjoyed a much higher status than infantry.

Number 2

The fact that the status of cavalry was considerably higher than that of foot soldiers did not reflect the respective fighting values of the two arms. Even in Frederic's times, it was a common viewpoint that the infantry formed the backbone of armies, was essential for winning military encounters and could be justly called the “queen of the battlefield.” Cavalry, on the other hand, was seen as an arm best suited for reconnaissance, pursuit and “screening” functions: cover for offensive or retrograde actions. And it was hoped that – with concentrated, well-timed *arme-blanche* (shock) attacks – in certain circumstances it could tip the balance of forces (something which, in reality, occurred infrequently.)

But no matter how one rated the military function of cavalry, its status derived principally from the superior reputation of its personnel. As in the case of the infantry, practically all commissioned officers in the cavalry were recruited among the landed gentry. But, whereas ordinary infantrymen came from all walks of life, many cavalrymen had thorough riding experience prior to their entry into the forces and

often enjoyed a personal relationship with their noble superiors. Cavalry was quite elitist and regarded more reliable than other force elements. In Frederic's days, this meant that cavalry units were not only employed for military tasks proper, but also for "shepherding" their comrades in the infantry. Especially when infantry formations were marched through covered terrain, forests for example, they had to be escorted by trustworthy cavalry. Otherwise quite a few infantrymen, most of whom had been – one way or the other -- pressed into the forces, would have vanished into the underbrush.

Despite the fact that the infantry had rather humble origins, its status rose steadily. During the 19th century two developments mainly contributed to this trend:

- The increasing firepower of the infantry (and artillery) substantially reduced the cavalry's chances for survival on the battlefield.
- The masses of infantry in the much enlarged armies of that era were more frequently recruited on the basis of conscription: an institution then enjoying broad public support.

In the Great War (1914-18), when cavalry forces nearly vanished from the fire-swept battlefields in France and Italy, the infantry seemed to have won the status contest once and for all. Yet, ironically, at the very moment of victory a new element appeared on the scene: armored and mechanized forces whose roles were seen as cavalry-like and which, in their early days, relied substantially for recruitment on former cavalry officers and noble families.

Number 3

"Infantry" stands for the arm whose combat soldiers are trained and prepared to fight on foot: exclusively, mostly or when the situation requires. (There was once a special kind of light cavalry, dragoons, whose soldiers were also trained to fight dismounted in certain circumstances. But their days are over.) With the notable exception of mountain infantry, a term referring to the terrain of operations, modern infantry forces are characterized by the means of allocation: naval, airborne, heliborne, armored (or heavy mechanized), light mechanized or motorized.

In addition there are Special Operations Forces (SOF) whose ground-fighting component is normally considered a kind of infantry as well – one with a decidedly elitist image. In this case it is assumed that neither the terrain of operations, nor the means of transport is appropriate for characterization: In other words, SOF are believed to be a kind of ubiquitous Jacks-of-all-trades.

In the new age of military interventionism the infantry has experienced a veritable renaissance and has come more to center-stage than ever before in modern times. Heavily armored elements, which in the realm of conventional ground forces had been the mainstay of the East-West confrontation, have lost quite a bit of their importance. Now the emphasis is placed on "lightness", entailing strategic (transcontinental) and operational (in-theater) mobility. In addition it is hoped that "lightness" will contribute to tactical agility. Generating relatively more and better infantry – along with some light (infantry-like) mechanized cavalry -- has been a preferred solution to the new intervention requirements.

In news reports on contemporary military interventions, and there are plenty, infantry and infantry-like forces are mentioned quite often. But references to “ordinary” – mechanized or motorized -- infantry are scarce. As if infantry, as such, still has a relatively low status, reports about its actions and accomplishments tend to include attributes that render the forces in question an aspect of being ‘outstanding.’ No problem if the subject of the respective report is a unit of SOF or “Recce Marines” proper. But if no such qualification fits, there is quick resort to “crack”, “elite”, “highly professional” and other similar attributes. The message conveyed to the public is that ordinary soldiers are not up to the challenge and that modern intervention scenarios require the toughest, the smartest and probably also the most aggressive.

Number 4

The suggestion that only the very best and most daring can do the job leads to the question of how many, narrowly defined, elite infantry or infantry-like forces there are, and how these roughly relate to the demand of relevant scenarios. Let us, in this context, examine the cases of the U.S.A. and Germany: the former being the world’s prime interventionist, whereas, in this respect, the latter can be regarded a middle-of-the-roader.

The SOF of the United States currently (2006) comprise about 37,000 active soldiers. According to the recent Quadrennial Defense Review this force size is to be augmented to about 46,000 by 2010. This means that the U.S. has, and continues to have, by far the world’s largest Special Operations Forces. Their size is, in part, a result of indigenous factors, above all the status-seeking “arms race” between Army, Navy/Marines and Air Force. And their projected growth appears to be mostly a response to perceived challenges: in particular, the need to fight insurgency.

It is somewhat sobering to learn, however, that the ‘teeth’ component of the U.S. SOF, namely the boots on the ground, has been estimated to number less than 6,000 soldiers – to be increased to less than 7,000 by 2010. It almost goes without saying that fighting insurgency in two separate theaters, Afghanistan and Iraq (and possibly also a third contingency?) requires many more fighters: leaving a vast number of tasks to somewhat lesser élite-prone infantry, such as air- and heliborne, but even more to “ordinary” troops.

By contrast Germany has much smaller SOF. They number about 1,000 soldiers who all belong to the Army (“Kommando Spezialkräfte” – KSK). 400 of these can, at the most, be considered ground fighters (which implies a teeth-to-tail ratio better than in the U.S.). The Federal German Forces have found it rather difficult to attract enough personnel for this formation, although there are extra pay and other incentives. If one were to translate these recruiting difficulties into the American situation, taking into account the difference in population, the result would see the U.S. forces facing serious problems having at any given time more than 1,500 frontline SOF fighters. But in reality they have managed to reach a complement nearly four times as strong.

How can we understand this? The population of the United States is, on average, younger than that of Germany. In the U.S. the incentives for outstanding personnel appear to be higher, and the military has a somewhat better image. But does this sufficiently explain the recruiting gap? Probably not! A complementary explanation would be that in the United States the standards of admission to the Special

Operations Forces are lower than in Germany. Perhaps as a result of that 'arms race' between the services in which not just quality, but also quantity, matters.

Even if the 'elite' is not what it claims to be, it lacks the quantity sufficient to meet the challenge of modern intervention scenarios. There is no way around relying more on ordinary infantry which, of course, also implies that such forces have to be rendered fit for their very complex tasks. In other words, our focus should be less on the selective recruitment of the acme of youngsters, and rather more on a conceptual framework that helps turning even average young people into soldiers who can successfully contribute to a variety of taxing missions.

Digression: the "Jäger" concept

Baroque origins

In 1740 when Frederic II had just come to the throne, the Prussian Army was given a "Jägercorps", with only a few battalions, to be recruited among forest wardens and skilled hunters (*Jäger = hunter*) who were or had been servants of territorial princes and other noble owners of estates with large areas of non-cultivated, mostly wooded land. These recruits typically excelled in physical fitness, were good marksmen and could survive on their own in the wilderness.

When in the army, they were issued rifles (mostly double-barreled ones for increased firepower) which were significantly more accurate than the muskets given to ordinary line infantry. They trained for selective well-aimed fire rather than for volley fire. Their uniforms were less pompous than the ones sported by their comrades in the line, and - as an early attempt at camouflage - had a greenish color. Units of the *Jägercorps*, also known as light infantry, were employed for missions such as testing an adversary's strength through skirmishing, luring isolated enemy detachments into ambushes, hit-and-run attacks on outposts, and - in cooperation with cavalry - foraging and reconnaissance.

One and three quarters of a century later, at the outset of the Great War, the Prussian Army had 14 Jäger battalions; the Saxonian and Bavarian Armies two each. During that war quite a few German infantry divisions included Jäger regiments, each consisting of three battalions, and there also was one Jäger division. Of course, such a considerable growth implied that the original pattern of recruitment had to be abandoned. Personnel had to be drawn from other walks of life. But what remained was what might be called a "Jäger spirit" along with a particular style of training and fighting: very much stressing fluid rather than positional warfare, decentralization, delegation of authority and scope for initiative.

Finnish example

In 1914 Finland was still a part of the Czarist Empire. When the war broke out, the Finnish movement for national independence saw this as a chance. A defeat of Russia, they expected, would necessarily result in the liberation of their fatherland. Hundreds of young people, among them many students, managed to escape from being coerced into the Russian forces: either by running away from home or, if they

had left Russia before the war, by staying abroad. Most of them intended to join the German Army, or more precisely, establish with German help, a military formation of their own that could contribute to the enemy's defeat and eventually to Finnish independence. Such aspirations converged with German ideas to create a military instrument that could be helpful in causing disarray and unrest in Finland, an important part of Russia's rear, or even bring about the collapse of the enemy's control there.

As a consequence, in the summer of 1915, the "Finnish Legion" was founded and headquartered in Northern Germany. Soon after, it became a typical – yet reinforced – Jäger battalion (*Jägerbataillon 27*) of the Prussian Army. Its German staff and drill personnel were drawn from experienced units of Jäger- as well as combat-engineer units. After less than a year the formation numbered 1,500 men. The strong battalion was equipped with captured Russian weapons and trained for fighting – guerilla/commando-style – behind Russian lines, especially in Finland. But as the battalion's insertion into Russia's rear appeared to be extremely difficult, the German High Command, in 1916, decided to employ it in positional (trench) warfare, at the eastern front. The Finnish legionnaires profoundly disliked this, as they had dreamed of operating on home territory, but nevertheless fought quite successfully. Obviously, a formation trained – Jäger-style – for guerrilla action could adequately cope with the challenges of trench warfare. It seems less likely that this can be expected in the reverse case.

Somewhat over a year later, the Finnish Legion finally got its chance. After the ouster of the Czarist régime, in February 1917, it was released from its duty along the eastern front and removed from the Prussian order of battle. And as civil war broke out in Finland, with the Russian government rapidly losing control there, it went home – leaving its German staff behind. From the summer of 1917 onwards it formed the core of the new "White" (bourgeois) Army and played a key role in driving the Bolsheviks out of the country: a precondition of making Finland an independent, modern nation state.

Because of both its military excellence and its value as a political symbol, the Legion soon became legendary. In this context the Finns speak of the "Jäger Movement" (*Jääkäriiliike*). The spirit and concept of Jäger-style warfare have been vital in shaping Finland's infantry in general. Without this particular background the astounding successes of the Finnish forces in their defense against the Soviet onslaught, 1939-40, cannot be understood.

Certainly there was much individual toughness and heroism stemming from the fact that the Finnish fighters defended home territory. More important for their performance, however, were ingenious tactics that envisaged hit-and-run action as well as the trapping, isolation and quick destruction of astray enemy units. Much emphasis was placed on the agility and organizational flexibility of sub-units. Small teams could be broken down into two functional elements: one for holding and masking, the other one for flanking attacks. This differed from established practice in most other armies that, at the lower levels of organization, required that everyone perform the same tactical action at the same time. Only with such innovations was it possible to at least partly compensate for a grotesque imbalance in men and materiel between the Finns and the Soviets.

Contemporary relevance

The Finnish Army continues to adhere to the Jäger concept. This also applies to the training of troops that have out-of-area operations among their primary missions. In this context the Jäger orientation appears to have spread all across Scandinavia (as Finland and other Scandinavian countries have formed joint intervention forces). Also in Central Europe the concept is alive and well. In Austria, for instance, a country with a long tradition in peacekeeping and peace support, the training of all infantry has been – to a considerable extent -- influenced by the “Jäger spirit”. In addition there has been the creation of special infantry units for guerrilla-style warfare (*Jagdkommandos*). Interestingly, even these Austrian high-quality formations, as with similar ones in Finland and other Scandinavian countries, have been recruited on the basis of conscription.

In yet another conscript army, that of Germany, the “Jäger spirit” is relevant as well (which is no surprise given the historical roots of the ‘Jäger’ and the current feeling that military interventions require light and particularly flexible forces). The problem appears to be, however, that the German Army at the same time intends to exhibit some heavier and high-tech elements for very intensive operations (of re-conquest, for instance) that in the military leaders’ minds still promise more international status than ordinary infantry.

This is perhaps why the term “Jäger”, as such, is no longer being used for the marking of formations. It only appears in combinations: “Fallschirmjäger” (airborne), “Gebirgsjäger” (mountain), etc. And the increasingly strong light mechanized forces, which indeed could be plausibly called “Jäger”, are named “Panzergrenadiere” (armored infantry), which is a term hitherto reserved for infantry riding on relatively heavy mechanized combat vehicles. There is common understanding, however, that all such force elements, once they arrive on the spot and dismount, have to be capable of fighting Jäger-style.

(Under “infantry”, an entry provided by a German Army officer to the International Military and Defense Encyclopedia, there is no reference to the term “Jäger” at all. Likewise it is missing in the article on infantry in a recent German compendium on land warfare. But the elaborations on tactics – especially when light motorized or mechanized forces are discussed -- sound like Jäger doctrine pure and proper.)

Challenges to modern infantry

Invading and defeating a hostile country

Let us take the case of a nation state, whose government is in reasonable control of its territory, being militarily assaulted! (Hopefully this is to be achieved by an international coalition, not by a lone hegemon; this group of countries enjoying full legitimation by the United Nations). Since it can be expected that the country to be invaded belongs to the Third World, there is a very low probability of large-scale encounters between massive armor forces of comparable capabilities. As in the Anglo-American assault on Iraq, high-tech armor plus armored infantry, in conjunction with close-air support, could be employed -- spearhead fashion -- to overrun a technologically inferior foe who may wish to pay back in the same currency, but can't.

But if the aim of the whole operation is to manifestly assume, not just military, but also political control of the country in question, there remains a lot of work to do for all other kinds of infantry. Apart from various types of mopping-up jobs, there is the key task of taking towns and cities: the latter often being of particular political importance. With this in mind, it should be noted that the swift seizure of major cities in the war against Saddam Hussein cannot be regarded as normally expectable or easily repeatable.

The situation in Iraq was quite unique: with an enemy initially being “co-operative” rather than resistant, and with wide, pompous alleys cum squares, which the Baath Régime had cut into medieval quarters, providing ideal avenues of access. It may well be that future contingencies require more traditional measures of offensive urban warfare: namely systematic, step-by-step operations in which heavy elements, but also new cutting-edge, high-tech gadgets (such as robots) would play a relatively limited role. Since such operations need a lot of manpower, Special Operations Forces, no matter how good their quality, cannot be considered center-stage. They, along with other elements of specialized infantry, such as airborne or mountain troops, would have to leave the bulk of the operations to ordinary light infantry. But this infantry should not be “light” in the sense that it is, say, standard American line infantry simply lacking some items of heavier equipment. On the contrary, its lightness should be founded on doctrine and training. A country or coalition incapable of achieving this should not embark on policies of military intervention in the first place.

Subduing resistance and guarding the peace

Subduing tough resistance applies to two kinds of problems: Controlling the aftermath of a war against a functioning state; and the case of intervention into a civil war which has developed in a “failed state”. In both cases key demands on the military are as follows:

- Continuous control of wide areas;
- Maintaining a non-provocative presence on the ground;
- Frequent and rapid shifts in the focus of attention;
- Flexible isolation and containment of pockets of resistance;
- Concentrated force to take strongholds with minimal collateral damage;
- Capacity to answer certain provocations with calculated counter-escalation.

These demands do not leave much scope for air and air assault operations: such operations tend to be highly provocative, often possess overkill qualities and do not signify that the intervening force intends to have a persistent grip on the region in question. A mix of high-quality armor, commando-type infantry and light mechanized forces with Jäger-style training and orientation are better suited to the demands of subduing resistance and guarding the peace.

The components of armor and commando-type infantry can be relatively small: to be used in taking strongholds and in well-focused counter-escalation. The bulk of the forces for wide area control and demonstrative, but non-provocative presence on the ground (recent experience suggests a generous dosage) should consist of light, mechanized contingents. These would be operationally highly mobile and enjoy

sufficient crew protection (no makeshift solutions such as the HUMMER with add-on armor.)

Troops would move in relatively small units: capable of acting on their own within a well-understood general frame of reference. If dismounted they could deal flexibly with minor incidents. And if a stronghold were to be contained, they could be rushed there from different directions combining their dismounted strength in a defensive manner.

If the tasks of containing and reducing resistance have been successfully solved, missions of peace support and peacekeeping get their chance. In these contingencies, which apply when and only when there is substantial control of a crisis region or an accord between formerly conflicting parties, the demands on the military are rather modest. If the task is peace support, which means that there is still some possibility of armed resistance flaring up, one may choose the same force components that are needed for subduing tough resistance: however with much less emphasis on heavy armor and Special Operations Forces. And in the case of peacekeeping, armor and commandos are superfluous altogether.

Human relations and adequate recruiting

In the context of *all the missions* discussed so far the aspect of human relations is of prime importance. Interventions on behalf of the international community will fail if they are accompanied by humiliation of the population in a crisis region; they must deliver security to persons and contribute to a sense of trust. Soldiers of an intervention force must be able to interact with the locals without arrogance. And they must take care with the culture and property of the locals. It is, for instance, extremely counterproductive, and a severe breach of international law, if soldiers from abroad turn a blind eye on looters and other criminals who try to exploit the opportunities between the demise of the old system and the establishment of a new order.

Unfortunately crack forces with an elitist touch have tended to develop what might be called a 'particularly militarist' spirit — an orientation that too often runs counter to the requirement of avoiding provocation. For instance, in Kosovo U.S. Marines painted "We are here to kill" on their armored vehicles. The question is whether or not more civilized behaviors can be expected from ordinary soldiers who constitute the bulk of infantry forces. At first glance it appears near-tautological that a person who is less "militarized" should be able to show a more "civilized" behavior. But the answer is not quite so simple.

If the majority of the occupation forces are not properly trained for their often taxing tasks, if they are only capable of following standard procedures in a rigid and schematic manner, they will sooner or later get frustrated and even scared by a lack of success and more dramatic mishaps. Frustration and fear do not constitute a good basis, however, for flexible and open attitudes towards the locals. Would a re-orientation of the training concept, in the sense suggested in this analysis, produce a better solution? Not necessarily so!

It has been observed that the introduction of the Jäger concept, along with the creation of a congenial spirit, could turn nearly everyone into a reasonably good

soldier. Yet this may only be true, if one stresses the word “near”. Indeed, the quality of an army’s “personnel input” matters.

The vast majority of the all-volunteer armies in the industrial West face a problem when it comes to attracting sufficient personnel. They have to compete with civilian employers for young people whose values are increasingly civilian. This is why, as a general tendency, the military gets personnel that – on average – is sub-standard. And this is also what may help explain two phenomena: namely the particular emphasis on elite elements in volunteer armies and the deficits in training of the bulk of the forces.

Only relatively few recruits are good enough to receive a more demanding training. Their particular qualities are then expected to compensate for the lack of performance among the more numerous others whose training – for reasons of poor personnel input – can only be schematic. This is a hopeless venture which in the end leads to a two-tier army with grave problems of adjustment to modern intervention scenarios. In this respect an army would be better off that uses short-term conscription to attract volunteers for longer-term careers, as conscription tends to bring into the forces better people than relying on the labor market.

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