Jungle Reconnaissance and the Pivot to the Pacific

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A U.S. Soldier in New Guinea during World War II once said, "It rains for 300 days and then the monsoons start."[1] This poses an ominous warning for today's Army intelligence planners faced with the "pivot" to the Pacific. For the past 12 years, Army intelligence has made great strides in surveillance and reconnaissance. The high-tech flying sensors and platforms of the 21st century have performed with remarkable success in the desert and mountains of Iraq and Afghanistan; however, will these same systems befall the historical challenges and technical limitations of past forays into the Pacific? Sandstorms will be replaced by monsoon rains and the barren landscape replaced by triple canopy jungle, rendering even a 1.8 gigapixel sensor array nearly useless to a ground commander. The reality is that commanders in the Pacific will again find themselves relying on the oldest surveillance platform in the inventory — the individual U.S. Soldier.

A myriad of challenges will arise when the U.S. Army is asked to return to the jungle, but perhaps the most dangerous will involve military intelligence's ability to provide the combat commander accurate and timely intelligence in an environment which has become alien to U.S. Soldiers. Monsoon conditions, low dense cloud levels, and a triple canopy jungle are not uncommon conditions in the Pacific Rim. These challenges to unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and satellite reconnaissance may inevitably leave the ground combat commander and his intelligence staff blind in the first months or even years of our next military action in the Pacific. This inability for the technological wizards to provide "real-time everything" would leave U.S. forces vulnerable to inferior, ill-trained forces with a vast knowledge of their regional terrain and environment. Of course, a defense-spending boom will seek to turn our UAVs into flying boats, and our next

generation sensors will be transitioned from their desert configuration into technological marvels, able to endure any ensuing typhoon. However, will the technology be able to be adapted in a timely and usable manner that provides sufficient information for operations in the Pacific? Or will combat commanders and intelligence staff be forced to rely on old technologies that are ill-equipped to operate in other parts of the world? Should the U.S. Army be developing alternatives to ensure the military will possess adequate and useful tools and skills to operate in every environment?

Since the closure of the U.S. Army Jungle Operations Training Center (JOTC) at Fort Sherman in Panama, jungle operations training has almost disappeared. Over the last few years, a few Soldiers have been afforded the opportunity to attend foreign jungle warfare training abroad. However, these lucky few will do little to satisfy the ground reconnaissance requirements of conventional forces tasked with humanitarian operations, peacekeeping, or combat operations in the Pacific. The 25th Infantry Division is standing up a jungle operations leaders course in Hawaii, but the lessons from World War II and Vietnam clearly spell out the need for training beyond a basic jungle warfare course.[2] A true jungle ground reconnaissance capability is essential for any unit to be successful in the U.S. Pacific Command area of responsibility.[3]

Southwest Pacific Area & Vietnam

In 1942, the U.S. Army began its campaign across the Southwest Pacific Area. This theater was a vast swath of thousands of islands to include the Philippines, Dutch East Indies, the western Solomon's, and New Guinea — the second largest island in the world. The after action reports from Southwest Pacific campaigns consistently outline the requirement for long-range jungle reconnaissance capabilities.[4] The U.S. Army in 1942 did not possess experience in a jungle environment and did not have a jungle reconnaissance program. The lessons learned report from the U.S. 37th Infantry Division following Bougainville noted the patrol distance required of jungle reconnaissance in the Southwest Pacific theater was far greater than had been expected and recommended units plan for patrols of up to 35 miles.[5] The U.S. Marine Corps quickly realized the need for improved intelligence capabilities. As noted in the after action reports of the 3rd Marine Division in Bougainville, commanders emphasized the necessity of long-range reconnaissance in the complex terrain of the South Pacific's jungle islands. This resulted in the 3rd Marine Division recommending that light armored scout units be reorganized into light ground reconnaissance units assigned to headquarters intelligence sections.

The U.S. Army's 32nd Division joined the Australians in New Guinea for the Buna-Gona Campaign in 1942. The division, which had no previous jungle training, was thrown into an alien environment of dense jungle and impassable streams. Additionally, ground intelligence was

> "The only way to train for jungle operations is to train in actual jungle... Unless troops live under conditions under which they have to fight, they will be dominated by their environment."[9]
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> **— Lieutenant General S.F. Rowell**
> Commander, New Guinea Force, 1942[6]

A rifleman with Bravo Company, 4th Battalion, 23rd Infantry Regiment, 2nd Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division surveys the jungle with Singapore Armed Forces soldiers during field training as part of Exercise Lightning Strike in Amoy Quee Camp, Singapore, on 24 July 2013.

almost nonexistent with staff estimates of enemy troop strengths and field fortifications produced far from the battlefield. The battle of Buna resulted in high American casualties and the relief of the division commander (General Edwin F. Harding) by the Allied Supreme Commander (General Douglas MacArthur) after just two weeks. The reality of sending untrained soldiers into a jungle environment to face an enemy skilled in jungle warfare prompted the new commander of the 32nd Division (General Robert L. Eichelberger) to initiate a formal jungle warfare training program. The program emphasized constant "scouting and patrolling" in jungle terrain as a key to future Army operations in the Pacific.[7]

Our forgotten lessons from the Southwest Pacific Area have been captured in FM 72-20, *Jungle Warfare* (1944). The manual defines ground reconnaissance as "one of the most important means available to the commander for gaining information of the enemy." To take FM 72-20 a step further, jungle reconnaissance in complex terrain during inclement weather will likely be the only means to gain timely information about the enemy. Additionally, the field manual warns against reliance on the use of aerial photography as a sole means of reconnaissance as the solid jungle canopy will obscure dramatic changes in typography and troop movements. The airborne platforms of the 21st century are a great leap from MacArthur's Army Air Corps in the Pacific, but flying in a typhoon

is still flying in a typhoon. When the storms arrive, the ground commander will be on his own with his Soldiers.

Leap forward 25 years from World War II, and the U.S. Army found itself in another jungle war in Vietnam. The jungle skills learned during previous engagements in the Southwest Pacific Area had atrophied, and the U.S. Army was again in need of a jungle reconnaissance capability. The solution in Vietnam was the same as it was in World War II — build the plane while in flight. In 1966, GEN William Westmoreland approved the development of the Military Assistance Command Vietnam Recondo School to be run by the 5th Special Forces Group. The course was three weeks in length and designed to train Soldiers in the "art and science of long-range reconnaissance techniques" in the jungle.[8] The demand for skilled jungle reconnaissance was so high in Vietnam that Recondo School included live-combat reconnaissance patrols, patrols in which students were injured and killed leading to the course's unofficial moniker of "deadliest school on earth."[9] As the cycle of Army priorities evolved following the Vietnam War and even more so after the Cold War, jungle warfare was again relegated to military history.

The challenge of day-to-day ground reconnaissance in the Pacific will continue to be the purview of the conventional ground unit. Soldiers will be tasked with conducting operations

in an operating environment for which very few have any jungle experience or training. The lost arts of jungle warfare will leave ground commanders blind even in the most sublime of Pacific operations. Battalion and brigade S2 shops will struggle to provide timely and accurate battlefield intelligence in an environment where UAVs and other airborne platforms may be grounded. Commanders will be forced to send their Infantrymen, scouts, and long-range reconnaissance units into the jungle.

The U.S. Army's current programs of instruction in reconnaissance are highly evolved and arguably some of the best instruction in the world. However, one key issue plagues all Army reconnaissance training for the Pacific; none of the current courses are taught in a jungle environment and there is no realistic way to simulate this challenging operational environment. Although the fundamentals are the same, history repeatedly demonstrates the same axiom — terrain cannot be underestimated. That is why the Army maintains a Northern Warfare Training Center and a Mountain Warfare School — to ensure skilled personnel are ready to act under specific conditions and in specific environments.

The U.S. Army's Reconnaissance and Surveillance Leaders Course is located in Fort Benning, Ga., and offers impressive training in the planning and conduct of "reconnaissance, surveillance, and target acquisition fundamentals."[10] However, the task organization and skills sets required for the jungles of the Pacific area of operations would leave Soldiers in some of the most dangerous terrain in the world with little knowledge of how to operate.

Another highly developed program of instruction in reconnaissance is the U.S. Army Armor School's Army Reconnaissance Course. This course provides instruction in the reconnaissance fundamentals to include zone, area, and route reconnaissance, communication, and mission planning. The course teaches terrain analysis and even reconnaissance in an urban environment.[11] The problem is all of these reconnaissance fundamentals are taught at Fort Benning — not in a jungle environment. For the task at hand, both of these courses serve a valid and defined purpose in the U.S. Army, and the curriculum provided in these courses would contribute greatly in the development of a jungle reconnaissance school.

The Solution

The solution to the challenges of intelligence collection in Pacific Command's area of responsibility is the creation, or rather the reactivation, of a U.S. Army jungle reconnaissance course. The Fort Sherman Jungle Operations Training Center, which was focused on conducting battalion training rotations in jungle warfare, is unrealistic in an era of fiscal constraint. One option between no jungle training and training entire battalions is the reactivation of the U.S. Army Recondo School. This will serve the Army in three very distinct ways. First, it will provide the combat commander with a readily available means of conducting ground reconnaissance in a jungle environment at the onset of a crisis without having to scramble to learn about the operating environment on a flight to the crisis zone.

Secondly, it will provide the Army with a trained cadre

of trained jungle experts. This cadre of school-trained jungle experts can form the instructor staff for a large-scale jungle warfare course similar to that of the U.S. Army Jungle Operations Training Center in Panama or can augment the 25th Infantry Division program in Hawaii. In a relatively short period, the Army could stand up a program of instruction large enough for training battalion or brigade-sized elements. Lastly, establishing this course forward in the Pacific would provide Soldiers the opportunity to train closely with our Pacific partners and learn from their jungle expertise.

Regardless of the advances in technology, the ability for ground commanders and their intelligence staff to employ effective ground reconnaissance in a jungle environment is an absolute necessity for the U.S. Army's "pivot" to the Pacific. The value gained training with and learning from our Pacific partners at a U.S. Army jungle reconnaissance course far out in the Pacific far outweighs the cost of transporting Soldiers to and from the school. The 25th Infantry Division's jungle warfare course is a great start; however, the fact remains that the Army needs a long-range jungle reconnaissance course taught in an actual jungle.

Notes

[1] Edward J. Drea, *New Guinea, The U.S. Army Campaigns of World War II*, CMH Pub 72-9 (brochure published by the U.S. Army Center Of Military History), http://www.history.army.mil/html/books/072/72-9/CMH_Pub_72-9.pdf.

[2] Michelle Tan, "Hawaii Unit Re-establishing Jungle Warfare School," *Army Times*, 4 June 2013, http://www.armytimes.com/article/20130604/NEWS/306040004.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Operations in the Bougainville Campaign, 1 November-28 December 1943, 3rd Marine Division, 1943.

[5] Lessons Learned by the 37th Infantry Division in the Bougainville Campaign, Headquarters, Army Ground Forces, 1 August 1944.

[6] Lt Gen. S.F. Rowell, Report on Operations New Guinea Force, 11 Aug to 28 Sep 42, November 1942, AWM54 519/6/60, originally quoted in *The Foundations of Victory: The Pacific War 1943-1944*; Edited by Peter Dennis and Jeffrey Grey (Canberra, Australia: Australian Department of Defence, 2004).

[7] John F. Shortal, "Hollandia: A Training Victory," *Military Review*, Volume LXVI, Number 5, May 1986, 41.

[8] MAJ (Retired) James F. Gebhardt, "Eyes Behind the Lines: U.S. Army Long-Range Reconnaissance and Surveillance Units," Global War on Terrorism Occasional Paper 10 Revised Edition, Combat Studies Institute Press, Fort Leavenworth, Kan., 2005.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Reconnaissance and Surveillance Leaders Course, Fort Benning, Ga, http://www.benning.army.mil/armor/316thCav/content/rslc/.

[11] Army Reconnaissance Course, U.S. Army Armor School, Fort Benning, http://www.benning.army.mil/armor/316thCav/content/ARC/.

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