

COIN Perspectives From On Point: Lessons Learned in Iraq

Sergeant Michael Hanson, USMC

"...the advantage goes not to the side that starts the war with the best techniques, but to the side that can best adapt."

--MCI 7403B Combat Techniques

Tanks and artillery don't defeat Insurgents, nor do warships, fighters, or bombers. Infantry defeats insurgents. These weapons can help the infantry man, but in the end it is the soldier on point that will locate, close with and destroy the enemy either by direct action or by denying the enemy the ability to operate against him. American infantry are outstanding troops, but there are simple ways to make them even more effective. If our infantry forces are restructured and reequipped, they can be better tailored to the fight they are currently engaged in. American infantrymen are equipped with a vast array of "force multipliers" and "battlefield dominators".

This is equipment that essentially gives an American Soldier the combat power of several enemy combatants. Devices like night vision goggles, PEQ2 infrared laser aiming devices, ACOG (Advanced Combat Optical Gunsight - a 4 power rifle scope) and advanced body armor. The United States outfits its warriors with the best gear it can afford. "The best equipment for our troops" is a universal ideal that the vast majority of Americans support.

So then how have small groups of rag tag insurgents with no complex war machines of their own confounded American efforts in Iraq for over four years? How have these bands of unrelated rebels armed with Soviet-era small arms and home made weapons managed to hold on beneath massive American military might for as long as they have?

The answer is simple: our enemy has chosen not to allow itself to be slaughtered by our advanced machines and crack infantry troops. The enemy fights in the human domain. He has made our machines and tactics, techniques and procedures (TTP) ineffective and obsolete by fighting in ways and places where we cannot use our machines to their potential.

We need to ask ourselves: "How do insurgents fight?" The answer lies in the fundamentals of guerrilla warfare. The insurgents are the underdog. Therefore, they will not present themselves to be massacred unless they are stupid. After four years of war most of the stupid ones are dead or have gotten smarter.

The insurgent fights on his terms. He only fights when he wants to fight. The combat zone is often his home. He has lived there his whole life and is not going anywhere else, and so he is

patient. He will wait for an opportunity to arise. If no opportunity comes he will wait longer. He chooses when he wants to fight. He chooses how to fight. He chooses the ground on which he fights. He decides if a situation is favorable to him. And he will only fight if the situation is in his favor, when he has the advantage. That puts us at a disadvantage. If the time, place and method of attack are all decided by the enemy, then that means he has the initiative. He is proactive and we are reactive. If we ever gain the initiative in a fight he will break contact and disappear. The insurgent only fights when he wants to fight and when he is prepared to fight. The only time he fights when he doesn't want to is when he is trapped and has no choice but to fight his way out.

The initiative in this war was with the insurgents for a very long time. They had the advantages because we let them have the advantages. We are reactive by nature. We hoped to draw fire and then quickly counterattack and turn the fight. But we cannot seize the initiative by counter attacking if there is no one to counter attack. The enemy knows this and has made this his TTP. That is why the enemy began employing victim initiated IED's. They could hit us and we couldn't hit them back because they are not even there to hit back at.

We need to ask ourselves: "What would we do if we were the insurgents?" Look at the facts: Insurgents typically operate in 3-4 man cells. Infantry Marines patrol with a squad consisting of 3 fire teams. Each fire team, ideally, has four Marines with hand grenades, one M249 Squad Automatic Weapon, one M203 40mm grenade launcher, and three M16's ideally with ACOG's and PEQ2's. Each man has night vision capabilities and is wearing full body armor kit. Within the squad, each fire team is its own maneuver element. If one team gets engaged it can establish a base of fire while the other two maneuver on the enemy. Three fire teams, or one squad, can easily surround or cordon off a building until support arrives.

If you were a 3-4 man insurgent cell would you attack a Marine rifle squad? Would you attack an M1 Abrams tank with its 120mm main gun? A Bradley fighting vehicle with its 25mm chain gun? An LAV? A Stryker? Or an up armored humvee with a .50 caliber machine gun, a 40mm MK-19 or a TOW missile system? Would a fire team sized insurgent cell come out and shoot at any of these vehicles, much less one in a convoy of many more? No, they would not come out and shoot at one of these war machines with an AK or an RPG because they will get killed fast. They have done so in the past, and they have learned their lesson. The enemy has learned how we operate. They have learned that any of these war machines with whatever amount of firepower can only *return* fire. If they never fire on any of these machines then the machines can't fire back. They have neutralized our war machines, made them irrelevant.

The enemy won't openly shoot at our war machines, but they will put a bomb on a road 3 miles away where that machine has to drive on. Our war machines have been reduced to targets.

The enemy's weapon of choice among others is the Improvised Explosive Device, the IED. Made out of anything from military ordinance to home made explosives. The IED is the biggest threat to our troops in Iraq. The IED has evolved to meet everything we have developed to counter it. We add armor to our vehicles and they build bigger bombs to penetrate our armor. We develop TTP to catch triggermen using a command wire and then they use radio signals. We develop radio jamming devices to jam their signals and they create pressure plates and crunch wire initiators. A \$3.5 billion jammer defeated by a \$10 saw blade pressure plate. The enemy now

employs EFP's, or Explosively Formed Projectiles which can penetrate almost all of our armor systems.

For a long time the IED was the number one weapon that was killing and wounding our troops and destroying our equipment. Though the IED may not have been the enemy's main effort, it was definitely a large threat to our troops. If we can take that weapon away from the enemy, deny him its effectiveness, then that will greatly upset his efforts against us. He will have to completely change his ways to fight us. Perhaps he will be forced to challenge us in open gunfights where our troops can kill him. We can ignore their IED's, like they ignore our machines, and make them obsolete by avoiding them.

Surfaces and Gaps - MCDP-1, *Warfighting*, defines Surfaces and Gaps as such:

"Surfaces are enemy hard spots or enemy strengths. Gaps are soft spots or enemy weaknesses. The goal is to avoid enemy strength and focus the efforts against enemy weakness. Putting strength against weakness reduces casualties and is more likely to yield decisive results. Whenever possible, Gaps should be exploited."

Judging by the *Warfighting* definition of Surfaces and Gaps it seems that we are avoiding gaps and traveling only on surfaces. We are running the gauntlet every time we go out in vehicles. Consider that roads are channelized avenues of approach. We can never have observation on all roads at all times. The same roads must be cleared over and over again, every day. And we are being blown up in the same spots by IED's often times emplaced in the same holes, craters and culverts. We are playing their game.

We can make IED's obsolete by avoiding them. Naturally, we can't completely stop using the roads. But if we can decrease our need to be on the roads so much we will decrease our casualties and upset the enemy's actions. Why not use more air assets? Instead of huge resupply convoys braving IED infested roads, why not use air resupply to fly over the danger areas? Do we not have enough air assets? If not, then we should get them.

Iraq has the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, plus large lakes and countless wide canals. Why not use boats to insert/extract patrols? Or transport supplies? We already have off road vehicles, why not drive off road to avoid IED laden avenues? We need to avoid channelization. It is far fetched to propose to completely abandon using roads. But if we can decrease our need we can decrease casualties.

The best solution to this problem is to not expose ourselves to the threat. But in typical American fashion we developed an industrial war machine solution- the MRAP, Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicle. The MRAP is a big expensive piece of equipment that has all kinds of great stuff that still won't do much good. It can't even go off road without getting stuck. So we built a vehicle to counter IEDs that can only drive where the IEDs are.

The MRAP has a V shaped hull that deflects explosions from underneath it. And it has good armor on the sides. But it is vulnerable on top. The roof is thin. It is only a matter of time before the enemy figures out how to elevate IED's and rockets and point them down into the roof of an

MRAP. Imagine an EFP in a tree, a telephone pole, on a roof or on top of a wall aimed down at the vehicle. The MRAP may not have been defeated yet but, the enemy will figure out something to counter it as they always have before. It is only a matter of time before our enemies design a bomb that can flip the MRAP.

What We Need - Now

We need more and better infantry. Our infantry is good, but it is trained and employed wrong.

We think too much from the American perspective. Again, we need to ask ourselves, "What would I do if I was an insurgent. Insurgents act individually or in small groups, 3-4 man cells. Marines patrol with a full squad. A Marine rifle squad is ideally thirteen men which includes 3 M249 Squad Automatic Weapons, 3 M203 grenade launchers, 9 M16's with ACOG's, 1 AT4 or LAAW rocket launcher, hand grenades, full body armor kit and a radio to call in supporting arms or reinforcements. In short, a Marine rifle squad has a lot of fire power. Insurgents know this, we have been in Iraq for over five years, and they know how we operate. If you were an insurgent would you attack a Marine rifle squad with small arms? Probably not. In a straight up fire fight Marines come out on top.

Sometimes, rarely, but sometimes Marine squads get engaged by enemy with small arms. These engagements are normally ambushes initiated by the enemy. These attacks are short in nature. The enemy will make a quick attack and escape before the Marines can bring up their firepower or call for support.

Lately insurgents have been using more snipers. An enemy sniper shoots a Marine on an all too common "presence patrol". Where Marines slowly walk around shaking hands and talking to people. Enemy snipers have learned to shoot into the gaps in our armor. Marines are a sniper target from the minute they leave the wire to the minute they return.

We have tried to solve this by producing more armor for our troops. No Marine leaves the wire without helmet, flak jacket, front/back SAPI (Small Arms Protective Inserts) plates, side SAPI's, gloves and eye protection. All of this on top of the infantry man's already enormous load. The Personal Protective Gear (PPE) Marines wear, alone weighs about 40 pounds. His armaments and accessories add more weight to his load.

The average Marine Rifleman carries an M16, 180 rounds, 2 hand grenades, Night Vision Goggles (NVG's), PEQ2, ACOG, bayonet, and enough water to last the patrol, typically 1-1.5 gallons for a four hour patrol. The average Fire Team Leader carries all of this plus a M203 grenade launcher and 6-9 40mm grenades. A typical SAW gunner carries the M249 SAW, 400 rounds, a spare barrel (which he will never change), a Kabar knife, his NVG's, one set for his weapon & one set for his Kevlar, and water. A squad Radio Operator carries a rifleman's load plus a radio, sometimes two radios, and spare batteries. The Marine with an AT-4 or LAAW rocket carries the same as a rifleman plus his rocket. And distributed throughout the squad are pyrotechnics for signaling and Escalation of Force procedures. The average Marine's combat load is well over 60 pounds. An average squad radio operator's load is over 70 pounds. And the average SAW gunner carries over 80 pounds in gear.

Our Marines are overloaded. This weight limits their speed, mobility, range, stamina, agility and all around fighting capability. They can't go out far and they can't stay out long with all of this gear. It is simply too much. Combat patrols are typically four hours, and even that short amount of time is exhausting. Our Marines are being consistently outrun and outmaneuvered by an enemy with an AK, an extra magazine and a pair of running shoes.

The ideal of "all the best equipment for our soldiers" is responsible for this. The American people think they are helping their soldiers out by demanding they get as much protective equipment as possible. American civilians do not like seeing young Americans maimed and killed in foreign lands, rightly so. They see it on television, exploited by the news media and they demand "all the best equipment for our soldiers". And to satisfy Americans at home, the troops get weighed down with more and more gear. The more gear troops wear the "safer" they are, or so the thought goes. But to that Soldier or Marine on patrol staggering along under the weight of all of this unnecessary gear it doesn't seem to be in his best interests. No matter how new or expensive it is. All that matters to him is how much it weighs.

The first thing we need to do is drop all of the personal protective gear except for a helmet. All that other equipment is too heavy and hinders Marines more than it helps them. Do you get hit because your armor didn't stop the projectile or because you couldn't get out of the way fast enough? The protective gear the Marines carry is designed for close quarters combat, not for long patrols. The full armor kit can still be worn by Marines on post or riding in convoys.

The next thing that needs to happen is that we need to reorganize the structure of the combat patrols we're sending out.

"With conflicts of this type, you have to organize to fight. There's nothing sacrosanct about a battalion: 700 guys, four companies. Why can't you organize 700 guys into 70 10-man teams? Or 100 7-man teams? Again, the combat situation, the milieu, must dictate how you organize."

--Colonel Paul Melshen USMCR

The fire team is the decisive unit at this stage of the war. 4-6 men are much more likely to make contact with the enemy, draw the enemy into an open fight where we can destroy them with superior weapons and training. Imagine:

- 98 fire teams per battalion vs. 36 squads per battalion
- 36 fire teams per company vs. 12 squads per company
- 9 fire teams per platoon vs. 3 squads per platoon

We can cover three times as much ground using this concept. We can have three times as many units out. The chances of contact with the enemy are greater. These units should move covertly using cover and concealment. They set in hides to ambush the enemy in likely IED areas: intersections, bridges, culverts, etc. When an enemy comes out to plant an IED they get ambushed. These units can call in illumination missions from mortars or artillery frequently to

illuminate likely IED sites or suspicious areas. They can illuminate areas where there are no Marines to make the enemy think there are Marines observing those areas. This concept is similar to satellite patrolling, where there are many units out running parallel patrols. If a team gets engaged they can pop a red star cluster. The nearest unit moves quickly to their aid. If a team loses communications they return to base or link up with another unit. If they are being pursued by a larger enemy force they can escape and evade. These fire team (4-6 man) units will be able to move faster, quieter, they will be more agile, they will be able to fight harder, stay out longer and cover more ground. They will use hide sites, ambushes, covert movements and lots of, but not limited to, night operations. Teams could push enemies into ambush areas covered by other teams.

These units won't need to wear all the Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) that our current forces use because they are not going to be walking around in the open waiting to be shot by a sniper. There will be times when they cross open areas, this is not to say they will never be out of cover at all. But they will not expose themselves like our current patrols do. Instead of showing the enemy our presence through overt patrols, these units will be patrolling covertly, stealthily, undetected, covered, concealed. Tactical.

We will be ambushing the enemy. We will have the initiative. The enemy will know there are Marines out there somewhere. But they won't know where. They won't know when or where they are not being observed by Marines. That will deter them from misbehaving, for fear of being ambushed by an unseen Marine team.

Maneuver Warfare is the official Doctrine of the Marine Corps. According to MCDP 1, *Warfighting*, Maneuver Warfare is defined as a:

"...warfighting philosophy that seeks to shatter the enemy's cohesion through a variety of rapid, focused and unexpected actions which create a turbulent and rapidly deteriorating situation with which the enemy cannot cope."

This concept of fire team operations goes right along with the doctrine of maneuver warfare, at least in the counterinsurgency application. If the enemy is too afraid to plant IED's because there are swarms of unseen Marine teams running around in the palm groves, snaking through wadis in the desert and lurking in the shadows in the cities and villages then we will have accomplished our goal. The enemy may have to change his methods to confronting our Marines in open fire fights. If they attempt this, our men will be faster, more mobile and able to close with and destroy them. Without all of the cumbersome protective gear, our Marines will no longer be out run and out maneuvered. They will be able to go out farther, move faster, cover more ground and stay out longer. Instead of carrying over 60 pounds of gear and as many water bottles that they can fit in their pockets for a four hour patrol they can carry 30 pounds of equipment and enough chow and water to stay out for a few days.

"Train people to carry only functional gear. This is essential for low-intensity ops. Ammunition, water, a little chow. You should be able to stay out for four or five days on beef jerky and water. Anything that's not essential shouldn't be carried."

--Col Paul Melshen USMCR

"You will be weighed down with body armor, rations, extra ammunition, communications gear, and a thousand other things. The enemy will carry a rifle, an extra magazine, and a water bottle if he is lucky. Unless you ruthlessly lighten your load and enforce a culture of speed and mobility, the insurgents will consistently out-run and out-maneuver you."

--David Kilcullen, 28 Articles, Fundamentals of Company Level Counterinsurgency

"Establish patrolling methods that deter the enemy from attacking you. Often our patrolling approach seems to provoke, then defeat enemy attacks. This is counterproductive: It leads to a raiding, day tripping mindset, or, worse, a bunker mentality. Instead, practice deterrent patrolling. There many methods for this, including 'multiple' patrolling where you flood an area with numerous small patrols working together. Each is too small to be a worthwhile target, and the insurgents never know where all the patrols are- making an attack on one extremely risky."

--David Kilcullen, 28 Articles

We don't have to kill a lot of insurgents to defeat them. By constant presence and an aggressive patrolling routine we can deny the enemy the space and ability to operate against us.

Organization

"Conventional force structures, weapons, and tactics are not too applicable in this type of warfare."

--Col Paul Melshen USMCR

The first thing we need to do to reorganize our structure is to identify correct billets for the leaders of these new billets. The leaders of these units are going to be Non Commissioned Officers (NCOs); Corporals and Sergeants, and often times Lance Corporals. We need to *decentralize*. We need to train these small unit leaders how to call for close air support, supporting arms, and medevacs. We need to train these Marines to be leaders, because they are going to be leading the Marines in country. The Marine Corps already has plenty of great schools in existence that we should expand and send more Marines to. For example: Squad Leaders Course, Advanced Machine Gun Leaders Course, Advanced Mortar Leaders Course, Forward Observer School, Designated Marksman School, Man Tracker Course, Point Man Course, Sniper School, Squad Medics Course, etc. Perhaps we should open new schools like an Infantry Fire Team Leaders Course or improvised courses at the unit level to teach the Marines the skills they will need to operate independently in country. Good training is the best force multiplier. Training that teaches, reaffirms and tests Marines' combat skills, leadership abilities, decision making and fatigue/stress management. Not squad rushes against reinforced trench lines. The training we need to conduct can be done in the "back yard" and around the camp. We should model our

training after the Scout Sniper Platoons, who don't go out to far away ranges and then sit on their packs all day. They make the most of the terrain around the barracks.

And lastly, but most importantly, we need to trust these leaders and support their judgment and decisions since they are the ones on the line.

"Once you are in theater, situations will arise too quickly for orders, or even a commanders' intent. Your Corporals and private soldiers will have to make snap judgments with strategic impact. The only way to help them is to give them a shared understanding then trusts them to think for themselves on the day."

--David Kilcullen, 28 Articles

Despite the fact that we have communications that can link a commander far removed from a scene of action to a patrol leader in a volatile situation, we should not rely on these links to carry the commander's wishes. We need to rely on the Marine on the scene to make the decision. He is there and knows what is going on around him. He is best qualified to make that decision, not someone in a command post or away on the other side of a radio handset.

"Train the squad leaders- then trust them... Battles are won or lost in seconds: whoever can bring combat power to bear on a street corner, will win. The commander on the spot controls the fight. You must train your squad leaders to act intelligently and independently without orders. If your squad leaders are competent, you can get away with average company or platoon staffs. The reverse is not the case. Training should focus on basic skills: marksmanship, patrolling, security on the move and the halt, basic drills. When in doubt spend less time training company and platoon drills and more time training squads. Ruthlessly replace leaders who do not make the grade. But once your people are trained, and you have developed a shared operational 'diagnosis', you must trust them. We talk about this, but few company or platoon leaders really do trust their people. In counterinsurgency, you have no choice."

--David Kilcullen, 28 Articles

Many enlisted Marines and NCO's will agree that the Marine Corps gives a lot of lip service to small unit leadership and initiative but in the reality of operations we keep these small unit leaders on a tight leash.

"Rank is nothing, talent is everything. Not everyone is good at counterinsurgency. Many people don't understand the concept, and some who do can't execute it. It is difficult, and in a conventional force only a few people will master it. Anyone can learn the basics, but there are a few 'naturals'. Learn how to spot these people and put them into positions where they can make a difference. Rank matters far less than talent- a few good men led by a smart junior non-commissioned officer can succeed in counterinsurgency, where hundreds of well armed soldiers under a mediocre senior officer will fail."

--David Kilcullen, 28 Articles

We need to trust and empower our NCO's and Marines that have been to Iraq 2 or 3 times. This is why they are in the billet they are in, for their knowledge and experience. They need a clear commander's intent and mission statement to set the tone for them to work for. But after that we need to allow them to act on their knowledge and experience, and allow them to draw from these to make decisions on the scene, and not rely on guidance from higher echelons nowhere near the scene of action.

This is an unconventional war and requires unconventional tactics, techniques and procedures. Yet we rely on the machines and force structure of conventional wars as if it was a conventional fight. Bigger guns and thicker armor are not the solution. The enemy ignores this. He finds gaps in our conventional structure and targets our weaknesses. Whether it's attacking weak supply lines or shooting Marines in the gaps of their armor. If their bombs can't penetrate a tank's armor they find ways to flip them. Three or four tank mines stacked up on each other with a couple 155mm artillery shells buried beneath them. An upside down tank with its turret 50 meters away is essentially as dead as a tank with a hole in it. They find ways to nullify our firepower.

"Burn into the small unit leader's mind that to defeat the guerrilla he must think and act like a guerrilla. He must adopt the guerrilla's tactics, stealth, cunningness, drive, motivation and operational techniques. As a leader, he must be more ruthless in his demands upon his people than the guerrilla is with his subordinates. He must understand that the guerrilla can only be defeated by rugged 'Gung-Ho', superbly led soldiers who can, because of outstanding training 'out guerrilla the guerrilla'."

--Colonel David Hackworth, US Army

We rely on too much technology, too much gear, and too much stuff holding us down in our rear areas. We are fighting an enemy with an Ak-47 and a pair of Nikes. He uses copper wire, a battery and an artillery shell. We don't understand how he operates and thus, how to defeat him because we are an industrialized military organized around machines of war. We have taken for granted how effective a single man with a rifle can be.

"I use the Rhodesian War as a case study, comparing it to Vietnam. Vietnam was high-tech with mountains of ammunition, guns and butter, all the supplies and equipment you could dream of, and Rhodesia was 'counting bullets'. Here was a pariah state, isolated with economic sanctions, and they fought that counterinsurgency to a stalemate. Sometimes more is not better. When you have to live on your wits, suddenly you devise techniques to defeat the insurgents. You don't rely on technology. When you rely so much on technology, as we do, it suppresses the ability to come up with new solutions and the ability to use your brain."

--Col Paul Melshen, USMCR

This piece ends with a quote from Colonel David Hackworth:

"In Vietnam, today's most successful infantry tactics and techniques were yesterday's heresy and madness. When these 'overly reckless' ideas were first introduced by farseeing innovators in 1965 and 1966, few commanders took them seriously. Most, because of parochial conventional orientation, looked upon these new concepts with contempt not unlike many reactionary English lords' attitude toward the longbow before Crecy. But today in Vietnam, these once 'wild schemes' have become standard drill. These bold techniques have changed the thrust of the war from uneconomical multi brigade operations to fights that are fought almost exclusively by the squad and platoon."

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