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Mostly Dead:

Continuing the Discussion on the Reported Death of the Armor Corps

by Thomas J. Weiss

In mid-April, COL Gian Gentile offered what amounted to an Armor Corps post-mortem in a piece for Small Wars Journal called The Death of the Armor Corps.¹ Recently in the same pages, Major James Smith and Major James Harbridge wrote a rebuttal entitled A Combined Arms Response to Death of the Armor Corps.² The first question which came to mind after reading the latter piece was: if two Jacks beat a lone King in poker, do two Majors trump a Colonel in a doctrinal argument?

COL Gentile, in many important respects, echoes the arguments made by three former BCT commanders in a white paper diagnosing the Field Artillery with a similar disease, entitled The King and I (which was, ironically, forwarded to me by a gleeful Armor officer some two years ago). In essence, both arguments state that the capability of the maneuver, fires and effects elements of the Army to prosecute a high intensity conflict has been drastically reduced by our commitment to the counterinsurgency competencies employed in Iraq and Afghanistan. Indeed, COL Gentile plainly declares that the Armor corps “is no more.”

In their rebuttal, Majors Smith and Harbridge seem to be saying, like the old man about to be put onto a meat wagon in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, “We’re not dead yet.” They offer examples of units transitioning the spectrum of conflict and proffer that as an Army, our strength “is our ability to adapt and innovate while still retaining the ability to relearn our core competencies.”

Three fundamental questions arise from these two articles. First, is the Army truly at a place where its combined arms competencies have degraded almost to the point of non-existence? Second, if these competencies have degraded, does it constitute a crisis or a point from which we may never return? And third, looking beyond our current conflicts, how should we best organize and train our forces?

The answer to the first question is very clearly yes. Despite the Majors’ protestations our Army’s capability to fight – with a high degree of skill - in a high intensity conflict is severely degraded. COL Gentile asked a question in his piece, “when was the last time that a heavy Brigade Combat Team has done a combined arms, live fire exercise integrating all arms at Brigade level?” The two Majors never did directly answer this question, but the answer surely is on the march to Baghdad, but seldom if at all since. In Iraq last year I spoke with an officer fresh from the National Training Center and I asked if any of the Observer Controllers there had the experience necessary to put a live-fire combined arms training exercise together for a rotational

¹ Colonel Gian Gentile, *Small Wars Journal*, 17 April 2010

² Major James Smith and Major James Harbridge, *Small Wars Journal*, 1 June 2010

unit. The answer was no. Shortly after that, I took a poll of our battalion and there were exactly three officers with that type of combined arms experience – the Commander, the S3, and myself – and about double that number of NCOs. Enshrined in manuals and SOPs which are gathering dust we have the knowledge; we sorely lack the experience.

Armor, Artillery, Mechanized Infantry, and other branches are unschooled in combined arms competencies because they have been schooling themselves – to a very high degree – on the competencies needed to fight in Iraq and Afghanistan today. As long as we’ve been prosecuting those counterinsurgency campaigns, we have faced a choice: train for current combat conditions or train for possible future high intensity combat conditions in order to maintain those competencies. Our end strength, the force requirements of Iraq and Afghanistan, and the time between deployments have all conspired to dictate that we place a priority on the former at the expense of the latter. During a one year dwell time at home station, there is simply no time for forays into complicated combined arms competencies like the deliberate breach, and only limited time for basic staples like crew qualification. Of course our combined arms skills have atrophied. How could they not?

In an article in *Joint Force Quarterly* about a year ago, COL Gentile argued that “had [the Army] focused the majority of its time and resources prior to the Iraq War on counterinsurgency and nation building, it is reasonable to assume that the march to Baghdad...could have turned out much differently.”³ He is correct. Our focus on combined arms competencies in the years leading up to the march to Baghdad got us there in the first place. And our lack of focus on those competencies in the years since the march on Baghdad means that it’s doubtful we could reproduce the same brilliant result.

In the SWJ article in question, COL Gentile asked another question: “what if a heavy Brigade Combat Team in Iraq was told to pick up and head east and do a movement to contact?” In all probability, plenty of chaos would ensue. In Iraq last year, our battalion was one of the few artillery units north of Baghdad which brought all of its howitzers to Iraq. For the duration of our deployment, M1s and M2s remained parked, infrequently if ever used, dress right dress in a neat little line. Headquarters built intricate nests and fortified them heavily, making a quick extraction a near impossibility.

If the Army has lost these combined arms skills, are they gone for good? Here the two Majors are correct to say that we maintain the ability to relearn what has been lost. In his recent book, *A Question of Command*, Mark Moyar argues that “counterinsurgency is ‘leader-centric’ warfare, a contest between elites in which the elite with superiority in certain leadership attributes usually wins.”⁴ He expands on this thesis with historical examples, but he limits his analysis to counterinsurgency. *All* warfare is in a sense ‘leader-centric’ and nearly all of the attributes he specifies for effective counterinsurgency leaders could also apply to leaders in a high intensity conflict.⁵ It is here – the development of highly effective leaders – where the American military excels. And it is here even today where we have the largest advantage, albeit not in an easily quantifiable form, over other potential peer competitors.

³ Colonel Gian Gentile, *Joint Force Quarterly*, 1st Quarter 2009

⁴ Mark Moyar, *A Question of Command*, Yale University Press, 2009, pg. 6.

⁵ Moyar names ten attributes of effective counterinsurgency leaders: Initiative, Flexibility, Creativity, Judgment, Empathy, Charisma, Sociability, Dedication, Integrity, and Organization. With the possible exception of Sociability, an argument could be made that all effective leaders, whether prosecuting a counterinsurgency or not, have these same attributes.

During the course of my time as a Battalion S3 and XO, I often marveled at the challenges that our young Battery Commanders and junior Captains and Lieutenants surmounted time and time again. And our experience is typical. The Army continues to produce highly intelligent, quality leaders whose ability to adapt and innovate is startling. With multiple combat tours behind them, the average Captain is in many ways much more mature and seasoned than I was at a similar point in my career. With leaders of this caliber, of course the Army has the ability to relearn combined arms competencies.

Here we arrive at the crux of the second question, does all of this constitute a crisis? I don't believe it does. To paraphrase Donald Rumsfeld: you fight the wars that you have, not the wars that you want. Right now we are engaged in two wars that do not require the combined arms competencies in question. And given the choices available during the last decade, we're in a far better place now than we could have been.

In his recent book, Karl Rove writes that former President George W. Bush argued, during the decision making process which led to the Surge in Iraq, that "there were two ways to break the military. One was to overstretch it. The other was to allow it to be defeated...the latter would be far worse."⁶ And while he wasn't specifically speaking to our current debate, his point is valid. The President was willing to assume risk by overstretching the military or pulling it away from what had been its core combined arms competencies in the years before 2003 to avoid defeat in Iraq. Given those two probable outcomes, I suspect any reasonable person would have made the same choice.

COL Gentile acknowledges that it will be "hard, very hard" to regain our 2003 level of competency. In my estimation, to regain that level will require a year of re-training for each year 'lost' to counterinsurgency. If we pull out of Iraq and Afghanistan now and begin our retraining in earnest, in 2017 we, as an Army, will have regained the competencies and the depth we have lost. It will be a long, hard road filled with many scathing After-Action Reviews at the Combat Training Centers. Armed with the leaders we have, however, it is possible.

But do we want to regain those competencies? We come now to our final question: how best do we organize and train our forces for future conflict? It is a question which veritable armies of writers, analysts, lobbyists, and civilian and military leaders attempt to answer every day, most notably during the Quadrennial Defense Review. There is a long-running debate between COL Gentile and LTC John Nagl on this very subject. It's not a question for which I will propose an answer. Greater minds have thought deeper and longer than I on this subject. But I will offer a few thoughts.

For an impressive amount of time America has had near total security. Our very sovereignty has, arguably, not been in doubt since the Civil War. For most of the 20th century we prepared for and prosecuted war, both high intensity and irregular, upon the shores of other continents for other nations. The terminology we use to describe our security strategy speaks to securing American interests overseas, and not America itself. Indeed, we've created a Department of Homeland Security to defend our homeland against people who, while they can cause terrible death and destruction as evidenced by 9/11 and subsequent attacks, cannot yet directly challenge our sovereignty.

⁶ Karl Rove, *Courage and Consequence*, pg. 816

Our security umbrella, a result of our 20th century wars, extends across the Pacific to the shores of Asia and across the Atlantic to the European Union and NATO. It has been the greatest force for good in the last hundred years. Wherever America promised security, prosperity inevitably followed. One need look no farther than a nighttime satellite photo of the Korean peninsula showing the South bathed in light and the north shrouded in darkness.

During my lifetime the security debate was dominated by the conflict between East and West, Democracy and Communism, the USA and the USSR. Twenty years ago, that dichotomy dissolved and in the absence of another peer military competitor we have been searching for a new paradigm ever since.

What has emerged in its wake has challenged analysts and theorists, but could best be summed up by the term “Hybrid Warfare.” In his discussion of this phenomenon, Frank Hoffman of the Potomac Institute notes that “conventional and irregular forces, combatants and noncombatants, and even the physical/kinetic and virtual dimensions of conflict are blurring.”⁷

A recent example from the Middle East may offer an illustration of this type of warfare. On May 31, Israeli Defense Forces boarded the Mavi Marmara in international waters in order to prevent the ship from breaking a joint Israeli-Egyptian blockade and landing in Gaza. Portrayed in the press as a humanitarian mission, there is growing evidence that the Mavi Marmara, in addition to humanitarian activists, carried irregular forces that precipitated a deadly conflict with the IDF. World opinion instantly condemned the Israelis, and a week later Iran announced that they were prepared to escort convoys carrying humanitarian aid – and in all likelihood weapons – through the blockade to Gaza.

Israel has shown time and time again that its military is capable of defeating a conventional, combined arms attack. That country’s enemies have, therefore, quite logically shifted tactics to attack where Israel is weaker. And herein lies the power of hybrid warfare. As globalization – and more importantly, connectivity – continues apace, more doors are opened for the committed rogue, non-state, or transnational actor. Iran and Hamas can accomplish an operation (if indeed it was an operation) like that aboard the Mavi Marmara as a direct result of this connectivity.

The question then becomes, does this type of hybrid warfare present a challenge to Israeli sovereignty? The Mavi Marmara may have generated some positive press for Hamas, but will that enable them at some point of achieving their goal of the destruction of Israel? And by extension, will a hybrid enemy at some point in the future challenge the sovereignty of the United States?

For a possible answer, I’ll come full circle to COL Gentile. Since the beginning of time, wars have been decided by capturing and holding terrain. The United States military in 1991 and 2003 put on a stunning exhibition of the competencies required to do this, arguably the best the world has ever seen. In the long term, to lose or willingly degrade these competencies and replace them with hybrid war competencies is not justified. The risks are too great. A country can lose a hybrid war battle, as Israel has done time and time again, and still win the war. It cannot, however, lose a high intensity, combined arms battle without a much greater chance of losing the war.

⁷ Frank G. Hoffman, “Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars”, Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007, pg. 33.

Our attention must return to high intensity conflict in the years that follow our current wars while simultaneously developing our ability to meet hybrid threats. As President Bush did in late 2006, we must prioritize one while accepting risk in the other.

In sum, what I offer is a middle ground between COL Gentile's assertion that the Armor corps is dead and the two Major's assertion that it's not dead yet. Like the hero in the movie *The Princess Bride*, it's only *mostly dead*. As Billy Crystal's character says, "There's a big difference between mostly dead and all dead." But unlike the movie, it will take more than a magic pill coated with chocolate to revive it.

Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Weiss is an active duty Field Artillery Officer with served in various command and staff positions in multiple tours to Iraq. Currently, he is rehabilitating at Fort Sam Houston, TX, following injuries received in Iraq last year.

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