



SMALL WARS JOURNAL

smallwarsjournal.com

A Rifleman's War

Jeffrey Wall

I recently returned from leave to discover that the Battle Command Knowledge System (BCKS) had linked to an article about what really happened at the Battle of Wanat in Afghanistan. I read the article with serious focus as things relating to my profession are of interest to me.

Having been around a bit longer than the average guy in the Army, I thought some introductory historical perspective might be helpful. One could make comparisons of the fight at Wanat to both the Defense of Rorks Drift 22 – 23 January 1879 in the Transvaal (134 men of primarily the 24th Regiment of Foot [South Wales Borders] against the two day, one night multiple human wave assaults by the Zulu Impi [3000 – 4000 men] that had not been engaged at Isandlawana) and/or the Defense of Beechers Island 17 – 19 September 1868 outside of what is now Wray Colorado (Major Forsyth USA and 48 Army Scouts engaged by Cheyenne and Arapaho warriors – whose numbers vary, but no less than 200 Plains Indians, some report as many as 700).

In common with the Battle of Wanat, both of these historical cases saw “western Soldiers” engaged by an outnumbering enemy considered to be less sophisticated and/or well equipped than the soldiers were. In all three instances, the “western soldiers” were victorious – that is they were not overrun but in all three cases it was a very close run thing. A primary distinction however could be said to be the presence of supporting arms at Wanat that were not available at either Rorks Drift or Beechers Island.

While Rorks Drift can be viewed simply as a “Holy Cow, there are a lot of those guys” type of fight in that they had no other option but to fight as hard as they could, Wanat and Beechers Island have as a common theme the Army's struggle to find a way to fight a counterinsurgency campaign. The struggle against the Plains Indians has the aspect of a settled, agrarian society in conflict against a warlike tribal society - as does the Battle of Wanat, which saw Soldiers of a settled society pitted against a warlike tribal society of Pashtuns. Moreover, Beechers Island resulted from an experiment to see if fighting the Plains Indians “the Plains Indian way” would work for the Army. Essentially this was a “Let's use a hit and run raid” against the Indian's methodology.

It didn't work too well then and obviously something didn't work well at Wanat. We will explore this writer's opinions as to what didn't work well starting now...

What did work well at Beechers Island was the fact that the Army Scouts – chosen men – were all expert riflemen and they used their skills (starting with Major Forsyth's opening head shot on

an Indian) throughout the fight to successfully stand off multiple assaults by mounted warriors from improvised defensive positions. They didn't have such a technological advantage that they could fire indiscriminately; they had to aim their rifles. And no supporting arms were available.

So where am I going with this?

Simple. Afghanistan has become a rifleman's war.

Because we are fighting a counterinsurgency campaign against a tribal warrior society we have and increasingly continued to limit the use of supporting arms. Machineguns are even proscribed in villages and cities for fear of inflicting innocent civilian casualties.

The result is that we must rely more and more on our riflemen to engage and defeat the enemy. We know that 52% of the fights in Afghanistan begin at 500 meters and go out from there.

Recent publications by Dr. Lester Grau (Foreign Military Studies Office) indicate that a majority of the fights in Helmand Province are between 500 and 900 meters.

The problem is that we don't teach soldiers to engage with their rifles at those ranges any more.

If Major Thomas Ehrhart's monograph "Increasing Small Arms Lethality in Afghanistan: Taking Back the Infantry Half-Kilometer"¹ is correct, the Army gave up teaching marksmanship as a primary Soldier skill in 1958², then thinking that all future wars would be waged either atomically or by armored forces where infantrymen would mop up, engaging at close range a defeated and demoralized enemy who had been pulverized by supporting arms and armor.

No one anticipated a counterinsurgency campaign against mountain and desert tribesmen in the Hindu Kush Mountains and deserts of Afghanistan.

Vietnam tended to reinforce the misconception of rifle marksmanship being of secondary importance as much of the fighting there was at close range – either because of the thick vegetation and/or because the enemy grabbed us by the belt buckle³ and engaged at such close ranges that we could not bring our supporting arms to bear. By the way, this is essentially what happened at Wanat. The "Anti Coalition Forces" (ACM) came in close with superior numbers to try to deny us the use of supporting arms.

Again, back then no one anticipated a counterinsurgency campaign against mountain and desert tribesmen in the Hindu Kush Mountains and deserts of Afghanistan.

¹ *Increasing Small Arms Lethality in Afghanistan: Taking Back the Infantry Half-Kilometer*, A Monograph By Major Thomas P. Ehrhart United States Army Approved for School of Advanced Military Studies, United States Army Command and General Staff College Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, AY 2009

² *Ibid.*, 16

³ *Steel My Soldiers Hearts, The Hopeless to Hardcore, Transformation of the U.S. Army, 4th Battalion, 39th Infantry Vietnam*, Col David Hackworth and Eilhys Englandm, Rugged Land Inc., 2002

In either case, near or far, we now must rely on our riflemen to do the work. The trouble is they are not trained for it. Employed as I am at the California Pre-mobilization Training Assistance Element on what is known as Team Rifle, I am one in a squad sized unit tasked with training California Guardsmen (and those of other States who come through here) in rifle marksmanship as well as the M9 pistol and the machineguns M2, M240B, M249 and Mk19. We are most frequently given one day to present Preliminary Marksmanship Instruction (PMI) and 4 or 5 days on the ranges for all of these weapons – with **1 day** on the rifle range. According to 1st Army standards we are to – ideally - train a rifleman going to war with 58 rounds of ammunition – 18 to zero⁴ and 40 to qualify on the “Pop up Target Range”.

Let me say that again – 58 rounds.

What is not trained when Soldiers are sent to war after having fired only 58 rounds? Well let’s see – long range marksmanship, range estimation, the effects of wind and gravity on trajectory, short range marksmanship, gun handling skills such as rapid magazine changes and enough practice to cement these skills - all things that might help in Afghanistan.

In the civilian world one might call this “criminally negligent”.

In his seminal work *A Rifleman Went to War*, Captain Herbert W. McBride noted that trained riflemen observed the battlefield for targets, found them and engaged them while untrained riflemen simply put their rifles up over the lip of the trench and pulled the trigger. He further noted that it was the untrained rifleman who usually ran out of ammunition while the trained riflemen did not. Captain McBride also noted that he was shooting rifles in earnest by the age of 12 and shot them with regularity all of his life but it wasn’t until he was in his thirties that he would dare call himself a rifleman as he felt he had not yet attained sufficient knowledge and ability – 18 years of nearly weekly practice before he would dare claim to be a rifleman. [Hmm, that’s food for thought about what it really takes to be good with a rifle.] If you are in any way associated with infantry combat and have not read Captain McBride’s book, you really need to.

So we are sending Americans off to war with minimal rifle marksmanship training to engage an enemy on his turf with inadequate skills.

Inadequate skills you ask? Can’t be! Consider: The popup target qualification course is all fired with a battle sight zero out to 300 meters. No allowance is made for wind other than “hold a little this way or a little that way.” No training in reading the wind is given, no formulaic method is taught for wind estimation or how to calculate a wind adjustment even though the rifle itself has a half a minute of angle windage adjustment capability. Worse still is that many Soldiers don’t even attempt to shoot the 300 meter targets preferring to save those rounds to ensure a hit on the closer range targets. They have no idea what adjustments need to go on their rear sights to engage at 400, 500 or 600 meters. What we have then are soldiers whose effective engagement range capability (call it the EERC) is 200 to 225 meters.

You remember earlier I noted that 52% of the fights in Afghanistan begin at 500 meters?

⁴ Using 18 rounds or less, attain battlesight zero for a rifle by achieving five out of six rounds in two consecutive shot groups within a 4-centimeter circle.

Presumably you see the problem - the disconnect if you will - between the reality of the war in which we are engaged and our training regimen.

I must point out that as much as we hate to have “our way” compared as similar to the old Red Army’s way of doing things, they tried to keep the enemy in Afghanistan (and Chechnya for that matter) away from them - meaning outside 300 meters - so they could pound them with supporting arms because their soldiers couldn’t shoot.

We have chosen to reduce civilian casualties by limiting supporting arms. So be it. That means we must have infantrymen who can engage to 500 meters – if not 600 meters - with their service rifles. This takes time and ammunition. The Army must also codify the Squad Designated Marksman (SDM) and regain a capability it did away with in 1960⁵. The SDM can fill a lot of the current rifle ability void but, surprise, surprise, it takes time, ammunition, equipment⁶ and training⁷ to create an SDM.

Here is a good place to note that our doctrine on SDMs [what little there] needs to change. Currently the SDM fills the gap from 300m to 500m with snipers then picking up the range from 500 to 800m. There aren’t enough snipers so SDMs really need to be trained to fire to 700m.

Let’s do some math...

One SGLI payment is \$400,000.

One M855 cartridge costs about \$0.25. For sake of argument, say it takes 3,000 rounds to train a Soldier to engage targets really well from 0 to 500 yards (yards vs. meters is intentional here, most Known Distance Ranges are laid out in yards):

- $3,000 \times \$0.25 = \750 for the ammunition for 1 Soldier
- $\$400,000 / \$750 = 533$ Soldiers trained to really effectively engage an enemy with rifles via an increasingly difficult and stressful training regimen.

That’s about a battalion’s worth of Soldiers. Does anyone not think that training 533 Soldiers to employ their rifles really well will save at least one Soldier’s life?

In the cussing and discussing that occurs around here as a result of our training experience we would break out the ammunition as follows:

- 1200 rounds - 0 to 100 yards (this is the range zone where the pucker factor is greatest; where the shooting skills must be instinctive, i.e. based on “muscle memory”).

⁵ Ehrhart., 20

⁶ Ideally a magnified optic greater than 4 power and with a better reticle than exists in the Trijicon ACOG; an optic such as or similar to the Leupold 2.5-8X30mm scope with a mildot or Tactical Milling reticle is far more preferable based on our experience and testing

⁷ 10 to 14 days with 1500 rounds per student and access to both a known distance range to 600 yards and an unknown distance range to at least 700 yards.

- 300 rounds - 100 to 300 yards [this is really the easy distance, little gun handling under pressure is required and little adjustment for wind and gravity are needed.
- 1500 rounds – 300 to 600 yards (this is the range zone that requires practiced analytical ability; where the Soldier must know his Dope [data of previous engagements], range estimation, wind estimation & wind adjustments and be able to apply these factors).

Then on top of that we need to take an additional 10 to 14 days and another 1500 rounds to train the SDM. Why you ask would it take that much more time and that much more ammunition? A few reasons suffice to answer those questions:

Past 500 yards, the wind effects are so much greater that it is almost a different shooting world. High angle fire – Eastern Afghanistan is the land of the Hindu Kush Mountains. They are tall and steep. Gravity affects trajectory very differently when bullets are fired steeply uphill or steeply downhill. Soldiers who are required to make more precise shots need to know how to alter their Dope accordingly.

Moving targets – The enemy rarely stands still. ‘Nuff said.

Night fire – If we say that the night is ours, the SDM must be able to make his shots during periods of limited visibility.

Earlier I mentioned that we usually have 1 day on the rifle range. In contrast, Modern Army Combatives is mandated at 24 hours or 3 days of training for deploying Soldiers. While I understand there is a need to train Soldiers that fighting and grappling come with the territory, the militaries of the world have been trying to get away from hand to hand combat for something like 5,500 years. And while it still happens [rarely], the infantryman does far more of his personal killing with his rifle than anything else. Moreover – and let me go out on a limb here – if we really trained Soldiers to be proficient with their rifles, there would be even fewer hand to hand engagements.

What am I saying? I am saying that the Army has its training priorities way out of alignment from reality.

We are in a rifleman’s war. We need to realize this and train for it. If nothing I have written has struck a chord with you, do some research and study the battles of Majuba Hill and Laing’s Nek. Riflemen did all of that.

Once again - no one anticipated a counterinsurgency campaign against mountain and desert tribesmen in the Hindu Kush Mountains and deserts of Afghanistan.

But that is what we have got whether we like it or not. Trying to make the enemy fight our style of war hasn’t worked in nearly 9 years. He isn’t likely to change to what we want anytime soon. Why should he? ***What he is doing is working for him.*** Our own doctrine states that an insurgency that survives and grows is winning. Well, the Taliban have survived and grown. We need to face reality and adapt. Real rifle training is one basic and important way to do just that.

The Coalition lost 104 Soldiers in Afghanistan during June 2010. How many more before we train to the reality of this fight?

Jeffrey Wall, now a Staff Sergeant in the California Army National Guard, is a 1976 graduate of VMI, and a former infantry officer in the Marine Corps who commanded infantry and weapons platoons, a rifle company and guard forces and other companies of up to 600 Marines. He retired as an independent business man in 2001 and fought his way back into the service after 9/11. Since then he has served as an ETT in Afghanistan in the Eastern Operating Zone at company through brigade levels. At the California PTAE he has trained hundreds of Soldiers in rifle and pistol marksmanship as well as machinegun gunnery. A Distinguished Pistol Shot, he has "leg points" toward distinguished with the rifle and is a qualified sniper. He is the 2010 All Army Combat Marksmanship Open Champion.

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