CSI REPORT

No. 4

NOTES ON MILITARY ELITE UNITS

by LTC Gary L. Bounds



COMBAT
STUDIES
INSTITUTE

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3. Serve as the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command's executive agent for the development and coordination of an integrated, progressive program of military history instruction in the TRADOC service school system.

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Prepared in response to TRADOC Chief of Staff
request (16 March 1984)

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PREFACE

The attached notes were prepared by the Combat Studies Institute in response to a request by TRADOC Chief of Staff, MG Robert Forman, to assist in formulating ideas on elite forces using a historical perspective. CSI staff members discussed the paper with MG Forman at a working luncheon during his visit to the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College on 16 March 1984. Present at the luncheon were the Deputy Commandant of the College, MG Dave Palmer, and four historians from the Combat Studies Institute.

Most of the material in the "Notes" come from Roger Beaumont's Military Elites and Eliot Cohen's Commandos and Politicians. These two works address elite units in general. Many other works on elite units address specific operations of elite forces; some of these works appear under sources. This is not a comprehensive study of elite forces and only represents an overview prepared in response to MG Forman's request.

HISTORICAL EXAMPLES OF TYPES OF ELITE UNITS

Types*	Examples
Ceremonial	Philadelphia Black Horse Troop
Combat Proven	The Iron Brigade
Praetorian (Bodyguard)	The Early SS
Ethnic	Gurkhas
Political-Idealogical	International Brigade
Romanticist/Atavistic	1st Special Service Force
Technological/Proto-Cybernetic	79th Armored Division
Nihilistic	Spanish Foreign Legion
Functional/Objective	Aviators

* List spans the 20th century and was taken from page 3 of Beaumont's book. Also some of the roles shifted after initial growth; the SS, for example, acquired a combat proven role.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF ELITE FORCES*

- Lightly equipped.
- Staffed by volunteers.
- Distinctive uniforms or insignia.
- Relatively free of ordinary administration.
- Relatively free of ordinary discipline.
- Will not accept nonvolunteers.
- Created as "child of the storm."
- Special access to resources.
- More military but also more political.
- Highly mobile.
- Hit-and-run raider role.
- High physical and mental standards.
- Rapidly formed synthetic traditions.
- Entrance by "rite of passage."
- Usually receive high level of media coverage.
- Disdain for outsiders.
- Small unit or individual actions.
- Immunity from orthodox control.
- Serve a political purpose.
- Success breed proliferation.

* May or may not apply to all of the historical examples above.

WHY DO PEOPLE JOIN

- Enhanced sense of importance and achievement.
- Additional pay.
- Additional privileges.
- Additional food allocations.
- Excitement of participation in extra-legal type atmosphere above that of the average soldier (i.e., kill by stealth, attack unaware).
- Romantic image.

OTHER FACTORS/CONSIDERATIONS

- Specialized elite unit requirements rob parent organizations of leadership, and a "leadership drain" results. Privates in elite units often could have been sergeants or lieutenants in conventional units.

- Elite units usually have official recognition of elite status before being assembled.

- Elite units often trade youthful daring for time (fire brigade role) in an attempt to make up for deficiencies in hardware or personnel.

- Elite units often mirror successful enemy or friendly units of the past.

- The decision to create elite forces has often been impulsive or intuitive.

- Often the challenge for which the elite force was created disappears by the time the units are ready for action.

- Elite units are often misused because the need has vanished or the conditions have changed.

- Elite units serve in a laboratory role to test new concepts, weapons, and organizations.

- When elite units are too large as in the case of French Paratroopers and the Waffin SS, they usurp conventional unit missions.

- Placing elite units in intense battle situations creates a "selection-destruction" cycle that usually results in diminishing numbers of available high quality volunteers and in eventual disbanding of the force.

- Resentment is often the reason for disbanding elite units. (Bradley and Montgomery, for example, both shared a disdain for special units.)

- Because elite forces are often created during a state of retreat, defeat, or frustration, they can be symptomatic of leadership under pressure.

- Elite units serve as "visual spice" for a political show of force, such as mass airborne drops in the 1950s Cold War Era.

- Volunteer casualties do not create the political feedback of conscripts.

- Elite forces often have political origins, such as Churchill's British Commandos, Kennedy's U.S. Army Special Forces, and Dayan's Israeli Defense Force Airborne.

HISTORICAL EXAMPLES

Vignette 1: World War I

During World War I, the stalemate of trench warfare created conditions of intense frustration because of high casualties, seemingly endless artillery fire, and no sense of accomplishment. The stalemate forced a turn to elite units, which required aggressive, reliable, and intelligent personnel to carry out the operations. Examples were the German Storm Troopers of the 1917-18 offensive, the Italian Arditi and Alpini, the British and French tank units, and German U-Boats. The Storm Trooper volunteers came from the urban middle class, and many had university backgrounds. Training emphasized knives, handgrenades, entrenching tools, and other individual weapons. The Arditi wore black shirts and distinctive headgear and had a nihilistic motto, "who cares?"

Vignette 2: World War II

From December 1941 through November 1942, the United States experienced a period of frustration from not being able to respond to the German threat with large-scale operations. As a result, the first Ranger Companies were formed in England by MG Lucian Truscott. This action was approved by U.S. Army Chief of Staff GEN George C. Marshall. The units formed, trained with the British, and participated in a limited role in the Dieppe raid. After a number of successful limited operations, they were used as a spearhead force at Cisterna during the Anzio Beachhead expansion. In this conventional role, all but six members of a 767-man forces were killed or captured. The remaining numbers were either transferred to the 1st Special Service Force or sent home to train new units.

Vignette 3: 1st Special Service Force

This Canadian-American unit was created to take part in a raid designed to destroy Norway's industrial capability. The Canadians were high quality volunteers, but the U.S. "volunteers" came, for the most part, from various jails and detention facilities. Thus, the unit required restaffing, before training. Political considerations kept the unit from being committed to the Norway mission. The unit, however, still received airborne, mountain, and Arctic training. Later, the unit was committed to the Italian campaign and then to southern France. After suffering substantial casualties, it was disbanded in December 1944. This unit enjoyed direct communication with Ottawa and the Combined Chiefs of Staff.

Vignette 4: The American Volunteer Group (AVG) "Flying Tigers."

This elite group was chose from already elite pilot volunteers and further screened training and combat. Characterized by courage and skill and operating with deficient equipment, the unit had a strong visual image (tiger's mouth on the radiator scoop) and made dramatic press copy. Personnel for this illegal (by U.S. law) volunteer force were recruited by representatives of the Chinese government during visits to U.S. Army and Navy bases. Already carefully screened on medical grounds, trained and ready to fight, they were offered lucrative one-year contracts and dispatched to China under U.S. Navy escort in June 1941. The AVG, with its excellent combat record, proved that properly screened, well qualified, relatively highly paid elite forces could produce outstanding results: 299 confirmed Japanese aircraft downed plus 253 probable destroyed at a cost of 12 AVG planes lost in the air and 61 on the ground. These results occurred in spite of disciplinary problems, including a virtual mutiny, during the AVG's short existence.

Vignette 5: U.S. Airborne (World War II and Postwar)

During the reorganization of 1942, GEN McNair expressed concern over the growing number of "specialized" units and suggested breaking up airborne divisions, keeping parachutists separate, and making the rest into light divisions. This plan was unacceptable to European Theater planners, and an Airborne Center was established to develop doctrine and conduct training. Airborne successes were uneven, and many times the rapid advance of ground forces overran airborne objectives. Beaumont stated that Bradley intentionally allowed objectives to be overrun so lift aircraft could be used for supply runs to ground troops. In many instances, Allied airborne's greatest contribution was in the diversion of enemy forces and materiel to cope with real or perceived threats to the rear area. As is true with many elite forces, practice ran ahead of doctrine in the airborne.

Actual use of Allied airborne forces varied: to overrun airfields in North Africa, to seize key points in Sicily, to support beachhead operations in Salerno, to flank cover and diversion on D-Day, and as a supplement to the assault in southern France. During Operation Market, they served an airborne role and later a more conventional role during the Rhine crossings. The greatest misuse of airborne occurred when they operated for long periods as conventional forces, a role they could not fulfill without considerable attachments.

U.S. airborne soldiers in World War II were young, flat-stomached, physically fit, and agile. These men received increased pay, special insignia, and distinctive uniforms. That image continued as the young airborne warriors of World War II (Gavin, Taylor, and Ridgeway) became prominent postwar leaders. As the Cold War era unfolded, the elite airborne units became America's first-line reaction force for deployment contingencies, such as in Lebanon in 1958 and in the Dominican Republic in 1965. After 1950, American maintained peacetime conscription, and the Airborne became more of an elitist institution when all lieutenants commissioned in the Regular Army were required to take such training. This qualification served to distinguish between groups of officers as well as enlisted men.

Vignette 6: French Airborne

Late in developing during World War II, the French airborne came into its own during the postwar years. The classic example of the misuse of French airborne occurred at Dienbienphu in 1954. The Viet Minh, with the help of artillery supplied by the Chinese, besieged the French camp and eventually won the battle. Dienbienphu as since been compared to Arnhem, reflecting many of the same characteristics of elite force misuse: vague concept, confused command, lack of surprise, poor communications, resupply failure, operation at edge of the resupply aircraft range, weak intelligence, and poor choice of terrain. These factors all combined to defeat both the British elite forces at Arnhem and the French forces at Dienbienphu.

Summary

The following comments appear relevant based on the sources consulted. Casualty rates for elite forces are usually higher than for conventional units in both peace and war. For example, the 10th Mountain Division suffered five times more casualties than conventional forces and the heaviest wartime casualties in the Italian Campaign based on relative time

in combat. The creation of wartime elite forces has not come so much from need as from a desire to cope with frustration brought on by defeat, pressure, personnel shortages, or economic and materiel shortfalls. From a historical perspective, wartime elite units were "children of the storm," created in response to a specific challenge, and they often spent too long in the preparation process and, after initial use, were attrited through malassignment and misuse. This process usually led to disbanding after a period of time.

Elite units cause "leadership drains." Many of the highly motivated enlistees of these units could have gone on to higher rank in conventional units. In a sense, promotion would be stifled if it were not for the high number of leader casualties in elite units. These high casualty losses create what Beaumont calls a "selection-destruction" cycle that leads to depletion of assets (highly motivated, high quality personnel) that are not readily replaceable. Not only does this leadership drain create shortages for future replenishment of elite forces, but it also makes high quality leadership less available for conventional units that must carry the bulk of the fighting load.

It also appears that, during wartime, elite units are often misused and create numerous intra-organizational problems. Special considerations detract from overall force productivity.

During peacetime, elite units seem to be somewhat better received by the Army as a whole. One of the primary roles for elite forces is to serve as "visual spice" to political initiatives. Their use in this role was and is a good way to demonstrate force presence and technological advances. Casualties, except for training accidents, are not a major drain during peacetime. The "leadership drain" still exists to the detriment of conventional units when an elite force is too large. Many critics felt that elite forces should be assigned restricted missions, that operations should be small-scale, and that units should remain below brigade size in order to preclude their use as regular infantry. Elite forces serve a real purpose but must be considered in the context of the total force structure. Beaumont questioned whether elite forces were worth the cost and whether their past effectiveness had enhanced the overall force structure. These questions still need answers.

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