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2001

**THE ARMY'S LIGHT INFANTRY DIVISIONS:  
AN ANALYSIS OF ADVOCACY AND OPPOSITION**

**BY**

**LTC TIMOTHY A. WRAY**

# Report Documentation Page

Form Approved  
OMB No. 0704-0188

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1. REPORT DATE <b>2005</b>		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED -	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>The Army's Light Infantry Divisions: An Analysis of Advocacy and Opposition</b>				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>National War College, 300 5th Avenue, Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, DC, 20319-6000</b>				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT <b>see report</b>					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES <b>13</b>	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>			

In October 1983 the Army Chief of Staff, General John Wickham, announced his decision to create light infantry divisions. In the ten years since the American withdrawal from Vietnam, the general trend of US Army force structure development had been toward heavy mechanized and armor forces, and so Wickham's decision represented a major change of direction for the Army. To overcome resistance to the new units, Wickham and other Army leaders worked to generate a broad-based advocacy for light divisions. Despite these efforts, and also despite the sound strategic rationale for this new initiative, the creation of light infantry divisions touched off a storm of protest. Examination of this process reveals the institutional interests, jealousies, and prejudices of several subcultures both inside and outside the Army.

### **BACKGROUND**

In a publication called *White Paper 1984: Light Infantry Divisions*, General Wickham explained the strategic need for the new light forces. Citing British success in the Falklands, Israeli performance in Lebanon, and American intervention in Grenada as recent examples, Wickham contended that the United States needed readily available forces for rapid deployment to crisis areas. The new light infantry divisions would constitute such a force.

A key feature of these units was their strategic mobility: because of their streamlined size and composition, they could be transported aboard Air Force aircraft to potential trouble spots. This deployability was to be attained by removing much heavy equipment, firepower, and support infrastructure from the light

division while leaving it with a relatively large "slice" (50%) of combat troops.

Wickham calculated that light infantry divisions would fill a void in American military capability. Light divisions could be moved more quickly and more easily than could heavier forces. Moreover, light infantry units would be better suited for many crisis situations, such as counterinsurgency or other low intensity-type operations, than were ponderous tank or mechanized forces.

The lack of alternative Army light forces for crisis scenarios dated from 1973. In that year, three parallel factors in US defense policy propelled the Army into a force structure that focused almost entirely on heavy armored and mechanized divisions.

The first factor was the end of direct American involvement in Vietnam. The Army had built up a variety of "light" divisions for the war in Southeast Asia. (These forces were light only in the sense that they were tailored for low to mid-intensity combat and did not, as a rule, include armored vehicles.) After Vietnam, public sentiment was so strongly against American interventionism that the forces used in the war were dismantled or recast. In this process, the Army shifted its emphasis to refurbishing and rebuilding its long-neglected heavy forces. The new Abrams tanks and Bradley infantry fighting vehicles being fielded today are the legacy of the 1973 decision to concentrate on rebuilding the Army's heavy forces.

A second factor influencing the "heavying up" of the Army was the Nixon-Kissinger focus on Europe as the fulcrum of American foreign policy. Part of this policy included the revitalization of

NATO. The modernization of the Army's heavy forces -- whose primary combat role was the defense of Western Europe -- was a solid political token of American resolve and commitment. Further spurring this effort was the colossal arms buildup then underway within the Warsaw Pact, which in turn magnified the urgency of the American heavy force modernization effort.

Finally, the 1973 Middle East War shocked American strategists. As the first "hi-tech" war using the most modern weapons and equipment, the high attrition rates in this war showed how deadly modern battlefields had become. This gave added emphasis to the Army's determination to modernize and expand its heavy force structure.

By 1983, these pressures had produced an Army that was so focused on the Soviet "threat" in Central Europe that it had sacrificed its ability to respond quickly and effectively to the more likely crisis scenarios elsewhere. General Wickham proposed the creation of the light divisions to redress this imbalance.

### **ADVOCACY**

General Wickham announced the creation of five light infantry divisions. Two of these -- the 7th and the 25th Divisions -- would come from the reorganization of existing active divisions. Two others (6th and 10th Mountain) would be new divisions. A fifth light division was created by converting a National Guard unit (the 29th Division) to the light structure. This process was certain to be controversial, and so the Army's leaders sought to strengthen their hand by promoting advocacy for the program both outside and inside the Army.

The Army first found a willing external advocacy for its light divisions among civilian and military theorists who endorsed the strategic rationale outlined by Wickham. Some influential think-tank types were co-opted directly: Edward Luttwak, for example, was hired by the Army to produce a study entitled *The Strategic Utility of Light Divisions*. Not surprisingly, this document not only endorsed Wickham's strategic reasoning but even fleshed it out with hypothetical theater scenarios. Others quickly climbed aboard the bandwagon with supportive articles in military journals. General William DePuy, a retired officer who had been highly influential in the development of Army doctrine in 1970's, contributed an article entitled *The Light Infantry: Indispensable Element of a Balanced Force*. Steven Canby, a respected civilian expert on the European military balance (and a think tank partner of Luttwak's), added an article on the historical role of light infantry in European wars. External advocacy for the Army's light divisions was thus well launched among the civilian and military *cognoscenti*.

A second, even more important group of advocates was found within Congress. Many members of the so-called Military Reform Caucus eagerly embraced the new light divisions, hailing the Army's initiative as a refreshing departure from the Pentagon's habitual allegiance to expensive, hi-tech gadgetry.

Other members of Congress and of the Washington establishment supported the light divisions for different reasons. Wickham decided that the new 10th Mountain Division should be activated at Fort Drum, New York. Fort Drum was then a rundown, backwater post in the economically depressed area near upstate Watertown. The

prospect of tens of millions of dollars being pumped into the local economy earned the light division program strong congressional backing from the powerful New York delegation. Also coincidentally -- perhaps -- the 10th Mountain Division happened to have been the outfit of Senator Robert Dole during World War II. The Senate Minority Leader, a decorated officer who was seriously wounded in Italy, was appropriately feted at the division's activation ceremony and became a supporter. Likewise, the one light division created in the reserve components, the 29th Division, was composed of units from the Maryland and Virginia National Guard. These contingents were not only politically influential by virtue of their geography, but also counted among their number a particular reserve officer named John O. Marsh, who happened to be the Secretary of the Army.

Curiously, developing institutional advocacy inside the Army was a slower and more painstaking process. This was due to two reasons. First, the decision to create light infantry divisions caught the Army as a whole largely by surprise. Except for some consultation among the Army's most senior leaders, there had been little prior consideration given to the project by the Army staff or by the various branch schools. As a result, no "consensus building" had been done to prepare the Army community to accept the new force structure and its strategic role. Secondly, there was no existing constituency in favor of such a force within the Army. Until Wickham's decision to create these forces, none at all were in existence and so there were no internal advocates already in place.

The Army's leaders therefore set out to manufacture internal support for the light infantry divisions. Their strategy for doing this followed three general lines.

First, the various branch schools were given the job of designing their portion of the light divisions. This essentially gave each major arm (infantry, artillery, engineers, and so forth) a stake in the program's success. The schools' support would then be transmitted to the thousands of officer and NCO students trained at those schools annually, thereby causing advocacy to percolate out into the Army at all levels. (A major exception to this was the Armor School at Fort Knox. As the light divisions had no armored forces whatsoever, the Armor School's input was limited both in scope and enthusiasm.)

Secondly, the two existing active divisions slated for conversion to light structure (the 7th Division at Fort Ord and the 25th Division in Hawaii) were given short deadlines to complete their transition. In many cases, units were "transitioned" long before doctrinal manuals were available explaining how the new forces were to be employed. In other cases, unit organizations were changed repeatedly as branch schools rethought their input to the new division structure. Despite the turmoil this entailed, those divisions overwhelmingly benefitted from the extraordinary infusion of personnel, resources, and prestige. The officers and soldiers of those units quickly became ardent, outspoken advocates for the light divisions.

Finally, the Army's leadership relied also on the simplest, oldest, and most direct means of shaping internal advocacy: they ordered it.



The Army staff, for example, produced policy papers in May 1985 and June 1986 in its *Speaking with One Voice* series that refined and reargued the case for the light divisions. General Wickham and General William Richardson, the commander of all the Army's schools and training programs, were particularly outspoken in their support, and enjoined officers throughout the Army to defend the light divisions from their detractors.

Such strong support has produced the desired effect: the light divisions are here to stay. But even the support of powerful advocates both outside and inside the Army could not completely silence the critics who opposed the light divisions in order to protect their own institutional agendas.

### **OPPOSITION**

Opponents to the Army's light infantry divisions rapidly sprang up on all sides. External foes saw the light divisions as a dangerous shift in Army priorities that threatened their own livelihood. Similarly, a variety of subcultures within the Army sought to strangle the infant light forces so that they could not grow up to become rivals for limited resources or choice missions.

Among the most virulent external opponents to the Army's light divisions were civilian contractors whose lifeblood is the sale of expensive, hi-tech equipment to the military. Defense industry journals blossomed with articles denouncing the light divisions for their (choose one): lack of antitank weaponry; lack of armored protection and mobility; inadequate firepower; rudimentary communications and intelligence assets; lack of chemical warfare capability; and so forth. One of the first articles of this type to

appear in *Armed Forces Journal International* argued that the light division's faults could be cured at one blow by adding a battalion or two of light wheeled armored vehicles; not surprisingly, the author was affiliated with Cadillac Gage Company, a prominent manufacturer of those very items. The one consistent thread in nearly all of these articles was that they deplored the light divisions' disavowal of heavy, technologically sophisticated equipment.

The second external opponent of the Army light divisions was the United States Marine Corps. The Marines saw the creation of the light divisions as turf encroachment, since their own amphibious forces constitute an expeditionary force-in-being for crises overseas. After some early threatening noises, an all-out confrontation between the Army and the Marines was avoided only by a compromise. The Army agreed that it would not seek to build a strategic "forced entry" capability into the light divisions (that is, they would be dependent on friendly arrival airfields or staging bases in the contingency area). This removed the perceived threat to the Marines' traditional "forced entry" mission of seizing beach heads in hostile territory. As a result, early opposition by the Marine Corps to the Army's light divisions gave way to a *de facto* division of labor: the Marines retain first rights to crisis scenarios in littoral areas within reach of forward-deployed Marine units; the Army's light divisions can act either as a rapid reinforcement force for the lead Marine elements, or else they can act as the force of first choice in areas not easily accessible to amphibious forces.

Some of the harshest attacks on the light divisions have come from within the Army itself. These complaints have generally originated from three broad sources.

First, the light infantry divisions have been unfairly blamed for other major changes that occurred in the Army at the same time the light divisions were created. Coincident with the creation of the light divisions, the Army launched a reorganization program entitled Army of Excellence (AOE). AOE caused a wholesale reshuffling of active duty and reserve units, missions, and resources. One of AOE's most prominent goals was to increase the Army's overall "tooth-to-tail" ratio by consolidating or reducing various support units and functions. To many, the new light divisions seemed to be the cause of the AOE shakeout, and so the light forces became the target of their anger and resentment. (The most scathing indictment of the light divisions and their relationship to AOE was presented in *Armed Forces Journal International* in May, 1985 in an article entitled "*Army of Excellence? Time to Take Stock*" by two anonymous authors.)

A second source of internal criticism was the heavy force community. The heavy force advocates, groomed and catered to throughout the decade between 1973 and 1983, saw the light divisions as a serious threat to their own pre-eminence within the Army's mission hierarchy. (This pre-eminence takes on actual substance in the form of power, prestige, resources, and promotions, and so is not merely a function of vanity.) General Crosbie Saint, who in 1987 commanded III Armored Corps at Fort Hood, Texas and who today commands US Army forces in Europe, was an especially

determined opponent. Saint's arguments against the light divisions fell into two categories: the light divisions robbed personnel and resources from the Army's heavy forces, and the light divisions were of little value in a conventional, mid-to-high intensity war in Europe. Saint contended that the light divisions diverted the Army from the rightful focus of its energies: the defense of Central Europe.

The arguments of General Saint and other heavy force advocates have become muted somewhat in recent years. Their opposition ebbed largely because the heavy force modernization program proceeded without disruption from the light divisions. Another new trend undermining their objections is the recent disintegration of the Warsaw Pact, and the suggestion on both sides of the Atlantic that the American heavy forces deployed in Europe can soon be withdrawn and even disbanded. I expect that the longstanding fears of the heavy force community will come true with a vengeance in the near future: the Army's mechanized and armored forces will be greatly reduced, and the light divisions will be the beneficiaries in terms of prestige, power, promotions, and resources within the Army. This will happen not because the light divisions will steal primacy away from the heavy forces, but rather because the apparent end of the Cold War will make the heavy forces obsolete.

The last loud voice of internal objection to the light divisions was heard from one particular unit at one particular location: the 9th Infantry Division at Fort Lewis, Washington. Before General Wickham decreed the creation of new light infantry divisions, the 9th Division had been the focus of tentative Army experiments in a

newer, lighter, more deployable force structure. From 1979 to 1983 the 9th Division had been variously referred to as the Army's "High Technology Light Division" (HTLD) and "High Technology Test Bed" (HTTB) -- in effect, a field laboratory in which several new ideas in organization and state-of-the-art technology were tried out. In this capacity, the 9th Division was the Army's showpiece, and so it enjoyed all the collateral benefits (prestige, resources, promotions) that were otherwise hoarded by the heavy force community.

Unfortunately, by 1983 General Wickham had become disenchanted with the 9th (by then "Motorized") Division. Its long string of experiments with machinegun-mounted dune buggies and other oddities had earned it the disrespectful nickname of the "Toys-R-Us" Division throughout the Army. More importantly, its endeavors had seemed to produce little that was useful in terms of increased combat power or innovative tactics.

When Wickham announced the creation of the new light divisions, and announced as well that the 9th Division would not be one of these, it ended the 9th Division's tenure as a prestigious organization. Almost overnight the 9th Division became the ugly stepsister of the new 7th Light Infantry Division at Fort Ord. As a result of this, personnel from Fort Lewis in general and the 9th Division in particular were frequent critics of the light division. The most articulate statement of the 9th Division's lost opportunity is in an article entitled *Middleweight Forces and the Army's Deployability Dilemma* in the September 1989 issue of *Parameters*. Unfortunately, this article constitutes something of a eulogy for the 9th Motorized Division: prior to the article's publication, the Army

announced that it would convert it to a standard mechanized division. The 9th Division is now rumored to be high on the list of units to be deactivated in the event of future force structure cuts.

General John Wickham launched the Army's light divisions for sound strategic reasons. To promote this program, the Army leadership cultivated support for the light infantry forces both outside and inside the Army. Despite these efforts, the light divisions were the target of substantial criticism through the first five years of their existence. That opposition is fading as the Army moves from its earlier heavy-force focus toward a future emphasis on strategically deployable light forces.