
Military Police in Contingency Operations: Often the Force of Choice

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Within the last decade, the Military Police Corps has often been selected as the preferred force in responding to contingency situations. Military police are uniquely qualified to carry out a variety of peacekeeping and peacetime contingency missions in low-intensity conflict operations. This article explores the unique qualifications of MPs to undertake such roles and discusses the analytical process for determining the contingency situations most appropriate for their use.

The capability to field combat-ready forces in response to worldwide contingencies is one of the Army's primary strategic roles for the 1990s and beyond. The process of tailoring force packages that sufficiently demonstrate US resolve and protect national interests while preventing or de-escalating open military conflict is an essential component of strategic contingency planning. Today's volatile and politically charged international environment challenges strategic planners to design force packages capable of responding to specific contingency scenarios in a wide range of environments. The importance of tailored force-packaging is emphasized in FM 100-20, *Military Operations in Low-Intensity Conflict*:

Regardless of perspective, the instruments for the resolution of a conflict must be appropriate to its nature. The arsenal of national power includes political, economic, informational, and military instruments. The nature of the conflict environment determines the way leaders employ them.¹

The mix of forces selected for a contingency mission is influenced by the principles of METT-T (Mission, Enemy, Troops, Terrain, and Time Available) as well as a political element that is becoming increasingly dominant. Clausewitz's assertion that "war is simply a continuation of political

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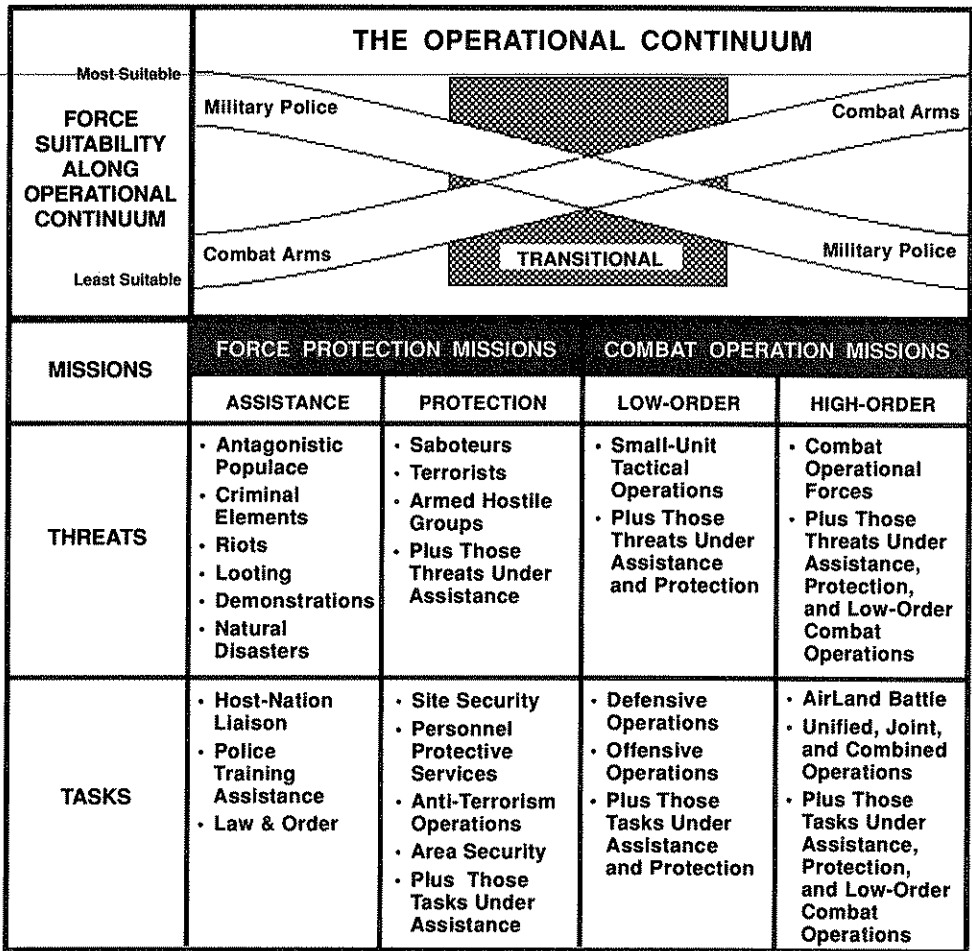
intercourse” applies also to contingency operations, for they too must be viewed as political instruments.² Consequently, particular scrutiny must be given to the political suitability of forces selected for a given contingency situation. Force suitability is not solely a function of mission capability or force structure. Political objectives shape military decisionmaking from the tactical to the strategic levels. Military courses of action, therefore, must be consistent with political aims even if unorthodox or nontraditional force structuring is entailed. Decisionmakers must be completely attuned to the policy goals attending each contingency, which may transcend purely military considerations. When selecting forces for contingency operations, for example, they must be sensitive to the perceptions of the local population, the international community, and the American public.

The last decade has seen a number of contingency situations where the Military Police Corps became the obvious choice. It has participated in events ranging from hurricane disaster relief in St. Croix in the Virgin Islands to Operation Just Cause in Panama. Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr., has described the military police as “today’s cavalry” that goes to the rescue in contingencies around the world.³ While this analogy might curl the spurs on some cavalymen’s boots, recent years have shown Colonel Summers’ observation to be on the mark. The overwhelming support and gratitude shown to the military police by the people of St. Croix after Hurricane Hugo demonstrated that such soldiers can excel at coming to the rescue.

Force Selection: Military Police Vis-à-vis the Combat Arms

The broad principles for force-tailoring in behalf of military actions falling anywhere on the operational continuum are depicted schematically in the accompanying diagram.⁴ The diagram highlights the missions and appropriate occasions for employment of military police in comparison with those of the traditional combat arms. Unique capabilities of the military police, coupled with their domestic and international acceptability as a security force, frequently make them the most appropriate force for contingencies occurring at the lower end of the operational continuum. Conversely, as the lethality of a situation intensifies

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and combat operations become more certain, the suitability of military police declines while that of the combat arms rises.

The acceptability and capability of a force being considered for a contingency mission determine its *suitability*. Force acceptability is based on a unit's political appropriateness and whether its qualities are consistent with accomplishing national interests and objectives. Force capability, on the other hand, is a measure of a unit's ability to counter an expected threat. A force may possess the capability to accomplish a military mission by virtue of its training, equipment, and structure. If, however, its mere presence inflames the situation, another type of force may need to be considered. The challenge is to apply the right force at the right time. Given the fluidity of contingency situations, this challenge can be most formidable.

Contemplated *missions* span the spectrum of contingency operations from force protection to combat operations. Although military police support

operations across the continuum, they may be the leading actor for operations falling within the left half of it—that of assisting and protecting.

The mission of *assistance* applies to those operations conducted by US forces to aid American and host-nation personnel during periods of heightened tension (e.g. noncombatant evacuation operations, natural or man-made disaster situations, and all other operations where the primary purpose of the force is the reestablishment or maintenance of normal peacetime activities). These operations may often be extensions of habitual missions conducted by US forces as part of their mission-essential task list. Threats in these situations may range from an antagonistic populace engaged in rioting, looting, and demonstrating to more hostile actions by elements who desire to disrupt or discredit governmental operations.

Military police units are uniquely suited to perform assistance missions as a result of their training and experience in dealing with citizens during periods of high stress and confusion. US objectives for these types of missions are support of the local population and protection of US interests and personnel while projecting a non-threatening, politically acceptable signature. Combat units, therefore, may not be the most preferred in these situations. Such units inherently cast a provocative, bellicose profile in the view of international and domestic communities. When the 82d Airborne Division is dispatched somewhere, for example, the entire world sits up and takes notice. Such publicity alone might jeopardize or impair a mission's success. But when a US Army military police battalion is flown to a trouble spot, no alarm bells jangle in capitals around the globe.

The mission of *protection* encompasses operations conducted by US forces providing for the security of American or foreign personnel, sites, facilities, and units. Implied tasks within this mission include those security measures required to deal with threats that have begun to actively target US interests. These are threats at the low end of the operational continuum: sabotage, hostage-taking, bombings, and attacks against individuals, groups, or businesses by terrorists or insurgents. Military police units can successfully perform this type of contingency operation, capitalizing on the low-threat signature they project.

While the organic capabilities of combat units might rate highly against the expected threat in protection scenarios, their use is often counterproductive. Circumstances in such cases usually require operating in a significantly force-restrictive environment against a predominantly covert threat. Maintaining low visibility would be difficult for combat forces. Further, insertion of combat units into this environment might be interpreted by the international community as an act of naked imperialism or aggression, extending well beyond the announced motives of protecting American personnel or facilities.

As the diagram suggests, selection of the most appropriate force becomes more difficult upon entering the transitional zone of the operational

continuum. Military police utility, though diminished here, may be considered adequate in light of overall national policy. Selection of military police might facilitate de-escalation to a protection mission. The lethality of the threat, however, and the threat's potential to increase in lethality must be closely monitored to ensure that military police capabilities are not overwhelmed and combat units are not introduced too late.

Missions involving *low-order combat operations* are those that counter forces threatening US personnel, sites, facilities, and units. The expected threats include those envisaged for the assistance and protection missions as well as operations by small enemy conventional and guerrilla units. Such threats thus include all previously discussed covert activities plus overt tactical operations against US targets by organized forces. Mission requirements for American security forces would now include active external screening and protection missions around critical targets, preemptive operations against threat strongholds and caches, and limited offensive operations. Combat forces are of course highly suited to these types of contingency operations.

While the desirability of military police as principal forces decreases as threat lethality increases, military police traditionally perform many critical tasks in support of forces engaged in combat operations. MP participation throughout all phases of contingency operations can relieve combat forces of tasks that detract from their primary mission. During the American intervention in the Dominican Republic in 1965, for example, difficulty in placing military police units on the ground early resulted in a shortage of personnel available to guard detainees. In one instance US troops handed rebel prisoners (Constitutionalists) over to Loyalist soldiers, who promptly shot them.⁵ General Bruce Palmer, Jr., who commanded US forces during the Dominican intervention, summed up his thoughts on the use of military police units as follows: "The military police



MPs search suspects during Operation Just Cause in Panama, December 1989.

were worth their weight in gold. Early in the intervention we found that a major weakness in the initial troop lists was a shortage of MP units, and we soon had to give them a priority on a par with combat units."⁶

Missions designated as *high-order combat operations* involve force-against-force actions where defeat of enemy combat forces per se is the immediate aim of US units. These operations are conducted when the United States has become decisively engaged, and the host-nation government may or may not be sympathetic to American interests. Consistent with American objectives, the function of our units is to close with and destroy opposing forces. Since this is the primary mission for which they were designed, combat forces are obviously best suited to perform operations occurring during this phase of the operational continuum. Here as always, however, military police units will have important collateral missions and must be included in the force package.

Military Police in Past Contingency Operations

We have already glanced at military police involvement during the US intervention in the Dominican Republic in 1965; a similar pattern has continued during the past decade. During Operation Urgent Fury in October 1983, military police were sent to Grenada as part of the initial deployment force. While operations by combat units were the focus during the mission's early phases, military police in their protection roles performed a variety of security missions, patrolled, and conducted detainee/internee processing.⁷ When combat operations terminated, the need remained for a force capable of helping host-nation law enforcement authorities regain their effectiveness. Military police were chosen to stay in Grenada and remained there long after the end of Urgent Fury.

Operation Golden Pheasant in Honduras in March 1988 illustrated how contingency missions can range rather widely along the operational continuum. Military police had been performing security and force protection operations in Honduras for some time, demonstrating a non-threatening but tangible US presence. When Nicaraguan Sandinistas crossed the Honduran border, the JCS initiated Golden Pheasant, ordering in combat units as a show of force.⁸ This action achieved the desired results and the Sandinistas withdrew. Combat forces were then redeployed as the military police resumed force protection operations, thus maintaining the desired US presence. These events demonstrated the dynamic interplay of military police and combat forces during contingency operations as the threat waxes and wanes and the US response is adjusted accordingly.

The unique capability of MPs to respond to civil disorders formed the basis for their deployment to St. Croix after the devastation of Hurricane Hugo in September 1989. The hurricane had traumatic effects on the National Guard, police, medical services, and other governmental agencies on the island. Riots and looting threatened the safety of residents, businesses, and property.⁹ A force



XVIII Airborne Corps

MPs proved again during Operation Just Cause that they are well-suited to fill a variety of roles in contingency operations.

was needed capable of imposing firm order on a civilian populace while observing stringent rules-of-engagment safeguards. As Colonel Summers observed:

Until recently, it would have indeed been the cavalry—that is, combat forces—pressed into riot-control duty. But this time the Army sent in more than 1000 combat support men and women especially organized trained and equipped for such duty. . . . These professionals soon had the situation well in hand.¹⁰

Military police were the force of choice for the St. Croix mission. They stopped the looting, reestablished law and order, and demonstrated their ability to work hand in hand with territorial and federal agencies and island residents.

Prior to Operation Just Cause in December 1989, military police had been rotating to Panama to provide security augmentation forces capable of protecting US interests in the area while projecting a nonthreatening political signature.¹¹ The critical need for restraint in the use of force and the necessity to work with Panamanian paramilitary police units made military police particularly appropriate. As Operation Just Cause kicked off and gained momentum, military police intensified site-security operations, performed detainee/internee processing missions, and provided ready-reaction forces.

When the situation de-escalated, military police assisted Panamanian law enforcement agencies in the reestablishment of discipline, law, and order and resumed their security-enhancement duties. A salient aspect of Operation Just Cause was noted by Bernard Adelsberger, writing in the *Army Times*: “The military intervention in Panama highlights the Pentagon’s ability to select elements from a wide array of military units for specific missions.”¹²

The force-selection process may be initiated at any point along the operational continuum and periodically reassessed and adjusted to accommodate changing international conditions and evolving national policy objectives. Force-mix adjustments by the CINCs and National Command Authorities can serve to escalate, de-escalate, or simply stabilize a situation to allow time for further assessment.

The Dominican Republic, Grenada, Honduras, St. Croix, and Panama have demonstrated the necessity of a guiding concept in the force-selection process—one that factors in the political imperatives and carefully correlates the type of military unit employed with the type of threat to be encountered and the type of military task to be performed. Analysis based upon such a guiding concept will show—perhaps surprisingly—that US interests are often best served not by the trumpeted forced entry of a US expeditionary force bristling with big guns and seconded by the full panoply of war—but rather by the unobtrusive introduction of constabulary soldiers trained to satisfy those basic needs of any society: law, order, security, and civil assistance.

NOTES

1. FM 100-20/AFM 2XY (Final Draft), *Military Operations in Low-Intensity Conflict* (Washington: Department of the Army and Department of the Air Force, 4 August 1989), p. vi.
2. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1976), p. 605.
3. Harry G. Summers, Jr., “Today’s Cavalry to the Rescue,” *Washington Times*, 28 September 1989, p. F4.
4. The operational continuum consists of three general states: peacetime competition, conflict, and war (JCS Test Pub 3-0, *Doctrine for Unified and Joint Operations* [Washington: Joint Chiefs of Staff, January 1990], pp. I-6, 7). The degree of force and violence involved generally increases as operations move from left to right along the continuum. The diagram shown here is adapted from a Force Selection Model prepared by the Military Police School, Ft. McClellan, Alabama.
5. Lawrence A. Yates, “Mounting an Intervention: The Dominican Republic, 1965,” *Military Review*, 69 (March 1989), 58.
6. Bruce Palmer, Jr., *Intervention in the Caribbean: The Dominican Crisis of 1965* (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1989), pp. 151-52.
7. Allen Gibbs and Allen Grammer, “Grenada Chronology of 82nd MPs,” *Military Police Journal*, 11 (Spring 1984), 34-35.
8. Ned B. Ennis, “Exercise Golden Pheasant: A Show of Force,” *Military Review*, 69 (March 1989), 20-26.
9. Dennis Hevesi, “Bush Dispatches Troops to Island In Storm’s Wake: Looting and Violence Reported on St. Croix,” *The New York Times*, 21 September 1989, p. A1.
10. Summers, p. F4.
11. 16th Military Police Brigade (Airborne) After-Action Report for Panama Security Augmentation, August 1988, p. 2.
12. Bernard J. Adelsberger, “The Army of the Future? Package of Forces Demonstrates Wide Variety of Abilities,” *Army Times*, 1 January 1990, p. R3.