

Running Head: PREPARDNESS AT THE OUTBREAK OF HOSTILITIES

U.S. Military Readiness at the beginning of Hostilities

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### Abstract

Our Army remains at the forefront of the nations' foreign policy arm. Through employment, national will, and determination, the United States Military continues forward in its quest for readiness and preparedness. Our military continues to modernize personnel, weapons systems, technology advances, and tactics. Historically, the outbreak of hostilities offers a snapshot of preparedness for our military. Through trial and error, historical analysis, and leader intuition, the military forges ahead with its continuous battle of staying prepared for future hostilities. This analysis will focus on that very topic and answer a fundamental question. Are we better prepared at the outbreak of hostilities than we were 30-40 years ago? We must journey back through time and examine historical examples. We can answer this question, reinforced with data to conclude whether or not the U.S. military has overcome the fundamental obstacles to achieve force readiness prior to the commencement of combat operations. Let's begin.

### Ia Drang Valley, 1965

The Ia Drang Valley of Vietnam symbolizes readiness shortcomings, national strategic failure and unpreparedness. The first battle of the Vietnam War in which the United States engaged large scale forces of the North Vietnamese Army in the Central Highlands. This battle and the results changed the war in Vietnam. The battle was bloody, with each side inflicting heavy casualties. Both sides claimed victory with the United States and the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) conducting a savage, hand to hand fight at close range. In the short term, the United States appears to make a stronger case for victory however, the long term consequences and historical context draw a stark irony in the realm of preparedness.

The United States Army entered the 1950 and 1960 hollowed out from the post World War drawdown. With the increasing Soviet threat and communist expansion, then Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara presided over the one of the largest expansions of the military. Known as ROAD (Reorganization Objectives Army Division) introduced in the 1960's, the new concept of a division sized task force. The perceived threat of a direct Soviet attack on Western Europe proved the driving force in the new philosophical thinking process. During the period, the Army expanded by more than one million men, increased from eleven to sixteen divisions and expanded the airlift capability by 400 percent. Strategic thinking evolved to a more defensive type of warfare whereby divisions would be required to increase their defensive capability and the rapid dispersal of forces. This change in doctrine from World War II and Korea placed the emphasis on destroying enemy forces rather than taking and holding territory as the main objective of defensive operations.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division (Airmobile) grew out of this new division doctrinal concept. A mobile division, with lift assets capable of putting up to 10,000 men on the ground within a few hours to defend a key piece of terrain. General William Westmoreland, commander of U.S.

troops in Vietnam, correctly predicted that the PAVN would use the dry season to launch a major offensive in the Central Highlands to achieve victory and allow communist guerillas (Vietcong) more freedom of maneuver inside South Vietnam territory. He and his staff made a request to increase the size of the force to thwart this threat.

Mistake #1: President Lyndon B. Johnson initially approved Gen. Westmoreland's request for a troop increase and a more aggressive offensive strategy against Vietcong main force units, but when Defense Secretary McNamara advocated a call-up of 235,000 reservist and national guardsman, President Johnson balked refusing to go that far. The price tag (\$8 billion) was too steep for him to swallow and he felt that this cost would threaten his "Great Society" legislation being debated on the congressional floor. All mobilization plans at that time were based on the assumption that a call-up approval would happen, so this threw the Army into a chaotic, emergency adjustment situation. Failure to commit on a national stage started a domino effect of exposing the Army to the realities of its unpreparedness.

Mistake #2: Despite a high state of perceived peacetime readiness, the transition from peace to war proved difficult for the 1<sup>st</sup> Calvary Division. Since the President refused to commit the nation, wartime regulations did not go into effect, causing a disturbing personnel turnover ratio just prior to deployment. Loss of key personnel scheduled to leave the military did not stop on the eve of war, and the division lost experience across the board from pilots, crew chiefs, aviation mechanics, experienced infantryman, etc... 2,700 soldiers in all that trained together for months prior. No stop loss policy could be put into effect without an official declaration of presidential decree.

Mistake #3: Personnel pirated from other units to fill the ranks caused a distinct problem as units' hurriedly trained new personnel with a new weapon (M16), that left little time for specialized training in the type of warfare (guerrilla warfare) that the Army would encounter. Some units reported that they did not get their new M16 rifles until 10 days before departure

causing a “hurry up” approach to cleaning, maintaining and qualifying with the new weapon system. Readiness suffered from this chain of events. Units barely learned anything about Vietcong tactics as they prepared to load departure aircraft. Although the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry arguably showed readiness to defeat a conventional force on a conventional battlefield, it may be questionable of whether or not the organization of the unit fit into a guerilla warfare concept. The terrain proved no match for the shifty, rotor wing assets that lifted units to within several hundred meters of enemy forces, but the helicopters proved vulnerable to withering ground fire.

#### Operation Iraqi Freedom, 2003

In early summer of 2002 with the Operation Enduring Freedom underway, United States Army Central Command (CENTCOM) relinquished responsibility of Afghanistan to 18<sup>th</sup> Airborne Corps and returned to the United States to plan and prepare for the invasion of Iraq. The initial plan revolved round two Army divisions. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division and the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division (Air Assault).

Redemption #1: Compared to the flawed policies of the Vietnam era administration, Gen. Tommy Franks, commander of CENTCOM, received full support of The Bush administration. Presidential decree orders and new policies that evolved from lessons learned provided the resources and political commitment to raise the confidence of the military establishment that civilian leadership and the American public would support the pre-emptive strategy of the United States.

Mobilization plans and the full call up of reserves and National Guard, if necessary were authorized. The initial price tag, touted as manageable due to the vast natural resources within the borders of Iraq, is still debatable today. The main point, however, is that a monetary investment at the national level did not deter the decision making process as it had in Vietnam.

Redemption #2: The support at the national level trickled down to individual unit level as in Vietnam, although having a positive effect. A presidential order combined with a majority

vote in Congress on the authorization for war allowed military leaders to employ wartime personnel policies. Stop loss, stop move went into effect. Key, experienced personnel stayed in units lending valuable expertise in their chosen field.

Commanders and senior NCO's that led their units through training and in some cases deployment to Afghanistan were frozen into position thereby preserving the cohesive, tight knit unit concept. Officers, NCO's and soldiers who had served together for over a year were now going to fight together. No individual departure and replacement system (as in Vietnam) would be authorized and the Army committed to rotating brigade sized units thus preserving unit integrity.

Redemption #3: During initial combat operations, the military performed flawlessly. Advanced weapons technology, combined arms tactics and experienced soldiers and leaders easily overwhelmed Iraqi forces within 30 days. The Iraqi Army proved overmatched by superior firepower, combined naval, air, and ground forces and the tenacity of the American warrior. The training investment instilled post-Vietnam proved to be a sound policy that reinvigorated the force and vowed never again to repeat the mistakes of the past. Training that began as a hallmark in the 1980's carried over to the military success of the present.

Weapon systems used to defeat the Iraqi Army were acquired years in advance and soldiers' expertise with the employment and maintenance proved effective. Lessons learned from Operation Desert Storm allowed a generation of young leaders to teach conventional tactics and the care of equipment in a hot, dusty, sandy environment. This was in stark contrast to the M16's handed out 10 days prior to combat operations in the Ia Drang Valley.

### Conclusion

Using two historical examples, the fundamental thesis question can be answered. Are we better prepared at the outbreak of hostilities than 30-40 years ago? The answer is an undeniable yes. Throughout our history, our military evolution begins with an analysis of the past. The Non-

Commissioned Officer (NCO) played a key role in this evolution.

The NCO's experiences and employment of individual training based on experience form the foundation of our improved state of preparedness. The NCO of today acknowledges the mistakes of the past and now knows the importance of "more sweat in training, less blood in battle". Our nation and the future generations expect nothing less.

This analysis concludes the United States Army has overcome the fundamental obstacles of achieving force readiness prior to the commencement of combat operations. Today's NCO recognizes the importance of training and readiness and the fact that when the call comes, it's too late to start preparing.

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