

PRACTICE-ORIENTED ARTICLE

Deployment of Light Infantry Under Air Mobility Doctrine – A Historical Study of Helicopter-deployed Light Infantry

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Can the present learn from the past? Moreover, if so, what lessons can we learn?

The Danish Parliament instructed the Armed Forces to create a light infantry unit. What resulted is the Slesvig Regiment of Foot, designed to conduct operations using helicopters and/or navy vessels.

This article is an analysis of the lessons that can be learned from three historic cases using light infantry in an air mobile capacity and under an air mobility doctrine. The need for such an analysis comes from the fact that this is a new way of conducting military operations for the Danish Army.

The cases are the American insertion at Ia Drang Valley in Vietnam 1965, the Rhodesian Bush War 1974–1980 and the British Operation Palliser in Sierra Leone 2000; all three chosen because they illustrate similarities and differences that will give the analysis the broader perspective needed to provide suitable lessons for a future Danish concept of operations for the light infantry unit. All three cases have a doctrinal background that are applicable in a Danish context.

The article argues that there are a number of lessons to be learned, such as the adherence to an air mobile doctrine, command and control measures, the level of training, and the experience and mind-set of the commanders. The elements of surprise, fire support, aggression when needed, flexibility, communication and the units' organization and equipment also provide valuable lessons.

Keywords: Light Infantry; Doctrine; Air Mobility; Military History; Defense; Vietnam War; Rhodesian Bush War; Operation Palliser

Introduction

As a consequence of the change in the security situation in Eastern Europe, with Russia now seen as increasingly challenging and assertive, the Danish Parliament agreed to strengthen the Danish Armed Forces in the Defence Agreement signed in 2018 (Forsvarsministeriet 2018: 1). Furthermore, a number of international security threats that needed to be confronted were identified by the signing parties, such as militant Islamism and migration from the Middle East and North Africa, as well as increased activity in the Arctic (Forsvarsministeriet 2018: 1).

One of the very tangible elements in the Defence Agreement was the recreation of the Slesvig Regiment of Foot, which had been mothballed in an earlier Defence Agreement in 2000 (Forsvarsministeriet 2000: 2). This recreation means that a battalion (XIII) of light infantry with a personnel strength of about 500 soldiers is now being trained with the purpose of being deployable by air or ship, if need be (Forsvarsministeriet 2018: 6).

The establishment of the Slesvig Regiment of Foot with a battalion of light infantry deployable by air or ship provides a much needed occasion to consider air mobility doctrine -- a doctrine designed to make optimal use of the technology available, primarily by using helicopters to insert units, thus providing a flexible tactical response to a developing situation. By analysing three historical cases where an air mobility doctrine

had a decisive impact, this article looks at the possibilities and challenges of deploying light infantry within the frame of an air mobility doctrine.

Analytical Approach

As mentioned earlier, Denmark today faces numerous security challenges, which the light infantry battalion might have to help counter. However, Russia, the Arctic, North Africa and the Middle East present very different circumstances for a military unit. A response to a developing situation with Russia alone could mean the battalion had to prepare for either insertion on the Island of Bornholm in the Baltic Sea, in the Baltic countries or in the Arctic parts of the Kingdom. As a country with modest military means at its disposal, an air mobility doctrine could provide some of the flexible tactical response needed. For this purpose, the article identifies three different historic cases in which the units have operated on the foundation of an air mobility doctrine, and not viewed the use of the helicopter as a mere means of transportation.

The article will analyse how an air mobility doctrine in three separate historic conflicts has been the foundation for the success or failure of the units involved. Success or failure are subjective concepts, and therefore debatable. However, this article defines success as the achievement of those aims which the command one level up identified for the units and operations analysed. Thus, in this article it is a failure not to achieve these aims and the conclusion of each case will reflect on the level of success or failure attained.

It will demonstrate that units involved in air mobile operations have a number of common denominators, which are basic for the successful outcome of the operations, and that these will require consideration by the XIII Battalion. The three historic case studies are the Battle of Ia Drang in 1965, the Rhodesian Bush War between 1974–1980 and Operation Palliser in Sierra Leone in 2000. The countries, which are analysed, the United States of America, Rhodesia and Great Britain, have all seen themselves as modern western societies and made use of relatively modern military equipment, enabling them to make full use of an air mobility doctrine. They operated under different doctrines, each of which was designed to optimize the organization and material available to them. But their doctrines all stemmed from the early development of air mobility that made it possible to concentrate men and material when and where they are most needed. This article argues that such a presumption is still relevant in a contemporary Danish context. As Denmark has only very limited amphibious warfare ship capability and modest means of air transport, cases based on major operations involving large forces and material such as amphibious assaults from large naval forces, are irrelevant in the context of this article.

The XIII Battalion is a regular army unit and how and where it will be deployed still remains to be seen. Since Danish military units, for the last three decades, have been involved in both combat and peacekeeping missions, it was necessary for this article to find historic examples that illustrate the range of conflicts such a unit might find itself in. Furthermore, as a Danish unit is unlikely to operate completely independently, but rather as part of a larger international force, the historic cases have to reflect units that operated on operative, tactical or even sub-tactical levels to make them relevant in the context of the XIII Battalion.

The opponents in the three historic cases are all very different. In the Battle of Ia Drang in 1965, the opponent was a regular North Vietnamese army unit. During the Rhodesian Bush War 1974–1980, the opponent was an independence movement heavily supported by foreign powers. On Operation Palliser in Sierra Leone in 2000, the opponent was a rebel movement with some support from abroad. Despite their differences, the three cases do have certain common elements that this article draws upon. The western units involved are inferior in number, but superior materially, and are able to draw on a number of assets which help them equalize their numerical shortcomings. Their organisational structure allows them to benefit from a number of advantages, such as advanced individual and unit training, communication skills and a regular Chain of Command. These decisive factors would arguably not be as one-sided against a peer opponent such as Russia, who has proven itself very militarily capable. Nevertheless, the American Air Mobility Doctrine was originally designed for a major conflict against a peer opponent and, although the three cases do not necessarily reflect this, the lessons learned from them would be applicable in a major conflict as well.

By considering three case studies, this article will carry out a comparative analysis of the use and deployment of light infantry in accordance with an air mobile doctrine and show which lessons may be applied. The basis for the comparison are those lessons, which in all three cases account for the difference between success and failure, and the conclusions drawn are brought to bear within a contemporary Danish context. This makes them relevant to XIII Battalion, which is working on an operative concept of its own, and which might benefit from historic lessons identified.

The article gives a future perspective based on a historic analysis. Self-contradictory as this may initially sound, the British historian, Michael Howard, says “When activities do thus constantly recur, and their

success can be assessed by a straightforward standard, it does not seem over-optimistic to assume that we can make judgments about them and draw conclusions which will have an abiding value.” (Howard 1962: 6). Howard teaches us that Military History must be studied in its entirety to give us a comprehensive understanding of the link between the subject and its present use (Howard 1962: 7). If one does not consider the entirety one will only have minor pieces to study and this is likely to lead to false conclusions.

Doctrines based on experiences and assumptions are used by military units for their training and operational standards. As Michael Howard points out, Military History can give us some of the conclusions that are needed as a basis for doctrines and operational standards when making “real war” tests is not possible. Historic examples are used extensively in the British Joint Doctrine Note 1/20 (Air Manoeuvre) (MOD (UK) 2020), where they add both context and inspiration to the work on air mobile operations (Ministry of Defence (UK) 2020). This note is relevant for a contemporary Danish perspective, especially when compared with the conclusions of this article.

Because the article considers three different battles and conflicts to draw lessons from, the basis for its conclusions are broader than an in-depth analysis of one particular battle. As in any article, it has been necessary to choose between many examples of air mobile operations. However, these choices have been made on the basis of their particular relevance in a modern Danish context.

The Development of Air Mobility Doctrines

The development of the helicopter from its original use as a means of transportation to a military tool took place in a number of countries.

The United States of America used the helicopter mainly for logistical purposes and the evacuation of wounded soldiers during the Korean War. Following that conflict they began to train their infantry units in deployability by helicopters, which resulted in them increasingly being seen as part of the units weapons and transportation system.

Utilizing the helicopter in this way was the result of a major technological development, partly driven by the civilian production industry, partly by demand from the US Armed Forces (Hickey 1979: 214). Given the opportunities to which the use of helicopters gave rise, the US Armed Forces started working on doctrinal development to optimise the helicopter as a military tool. This doctrinal and technological development meant that the helicopter could be used to deploy units onto the battlefield or, when fitted with heavy weaponry, to provide fire support to combat units. Thus the helicopter developed from being a mere means of transportation to becoming a means of direct support and a participative asset on the battlefield itself (Cheng 1994: 100–103).

At the centre of the American development of airmobile units in the 1950s was the doctrine of Air Mobility, originally conceived to counter the usage of nuclear weapons in a major conflict against the Warsaw pact (Cheng 1994: 60–64). The doctrine meant that military units could be flexibly inserted where they were most needed in time and space, thus creating local military supremacy. Air Mobility as a term became widely accepted in other countries when dealing with airmobile deployment and the Danish doctrine still uses the same term for such operations (Hærstaben 2016: 223).

The development of the Air Mobility Doctrine led the US to establish an airmobile army division in 1963. The unit was named the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile). This Division and the American development of the Air Mobile Doctrine had been greatly aided by the introduction of the UH-1 helicopter. The helicopter proved to be very versatile and capable of carrying out a wide variety of tasks, including troop transport and close air support (Coleman 1988: 186) (Cash 1985: 6).

During manoeuvres in America in the beginning of the 1960s the Air Mobility Doctrine was tested by the Division against regular Army divisions. These manoeuvres showed that the division, using the Air Mobile Doctrine, could successfully compete with more heavily armed units, partly by defeating the opponent in detail (Hickey 1979: 230). The helicopters were an integral part of the division, which meant the infantry and helicopter units had extensive knowledge of each other's strengths and weaknesses and that they were under the same tactical commander.

Concurrently with the American development of the use of helicopters in military operations, other countries developed their own doctrines (Hickey 1979: 200). The first operational deployment of infantry units using helicopters took place during the Suez Crisis in 1956 where the 45 Battalion of the Royal Marines were air-dropped in Port Said, Egypt, from British Aircraft Carriers. In 90 minutes, the British landed 400 men and numerous supplies in a hostile area using only 22 helicopters. The 45 Battalion held its bridgehead and subsequently attacked and took a number of objectives (Keightley 1957: 5334) (Hickey 1979: 202).

The French Armed Forces, too, were using helicopters in the late 1950s during the insurgency in Algeria. They developed their “Commandos de Chasse” units in 1959 with the aim of pursuing and harassing insurgent forces until they could deploy regular units to defeat them (de Durand 2012: 13). Thus, a new operative concept had been born and successfully tested in combat by more than one nation.

The Air Mobility Doctrines of America and other countries were basically designed to enable a unit to create a centre of gravity, at a time and place of its own choosing. By being very agile, a light Infantry unit could move vertically across the battlefield and use the element of surprise against enemy forces otherwise perceived as being stronger. This design survives today and is still the basic foundation for air mobile units.

In a modern context the British Armed Forces use the Joint Doctrine Note 1/20 (Air Manoeuvre) (MOD (UK) 2020) as the foundation for their use of air mobile forces. This is a comprehensive study paper from the British Ministry of Defence that permits each single service to develop its own doctrine. In it, a number of characteristics are identified and proposals made for defining elements in air manoeuvres and providing principles and considerations for air manoeuvre (Ministry of Defence (UK) 2020: iii). By comparing the British Doctrine Note to the conclusions in this article, it is possible to show how lessons from historic cases can be implemented in a modern context.

Vietnam

The Battle of Ia Drang in 1965 was the first major involvement of American troops in what was essentially a civil war in the former French colony of Indochina.

After the Second World War France had tried to re-establish her authority in Indochina by fighting a conventional war with highly mobile forces, including light-armoured units and a substantial number of parachute units. France’s efforts ended in 1954 with her defeat against Vietnamese Viet-Cong units at the Battle of Dien-Bien Phu (Prados 2009: 26–38). The US had supported the French efforts to fight the communist insurgency in Indochina and America gradually became more and more entangled in the conflict following France’s defeat. Initially American support was financial but in 1965, they started deploying regular Infantry units in South Vietnam (Hickey 1979: 218).

1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) was deployed to South Vietnam in 1965 to assist the country in its struggle against North Vietnam. However, this also gave the American Army an opportunity to test their Air Mobility Doctrine in conflict.

The first Battalion of the 7th Cavalry Regiment (1/7) was on the 13 November 1965 ordered to prepare for insertion into the Ia Drang Valley in South Vietnam (Coleman 1988: 184). Prior to this, the Battalion had been engaged in a few skirmishes, although never as a collective unit. Lieutenant-Colonel H. Moore, a veteran of the Korean War and a trained parachutist, led the Battalion. He had been in command for 1 ½ years and had worked intensively to develop the unit according to the Air Mobility Doctrine and install an offensive and aggressive spirit within the unit (Moore 1992: 24). At the time of insertion in the Ia Drang Valley on the morning of 14 November the Battalion, which normally would have an organizational strength of more than 750 soldiers, deployed with less than 500 men (Moore 1992: 42).

Lieutenant Colonel Moore gathered his unit for a preliminary orders briefing on the 13 November. The Brigade Commander had ordered the attack and defeat of a North Vietnamese Army (NVA) Regiment, which, according to American intelligence sources, amounted to some 1,800 men, in a hilly area of the Ia Drang Valley (Coleman 1988: 192) (Cash 1985: 4). In the early hours of the 14 November, he accompanied his company commanders on a reconnaissance mission over the area they had been ordered to assault and selected the best possible landing site (Cash 1985: 8).

Following Moore’s final orders, the 1/7 Battalion started mounting the 16 helicopters available, which meant just over one company in each lift. This left the battalion at an even greater numerical disadvantage. To counter this, heavy indirect fire preparation of the area of operations was initiated by the Americans in support of the landing of the first troops. Each soldier carried a heavy load of ammunition and grenades in order to offset the numerical disadvantage, something which proved essential during the following days of heavy combat. However, it also made the soldiers less manoeuvrable (Coleman 1988: 86) (Cash 1985: 10) (Moore 1992: 61). The Americans had been through a vigorous training regime prior to deployment and operated as an effective and coherent unit. As a result, they felt superior to the enemy soldiers they were about to attack (Moore 1992: 24) (Coleman 1988: 225).

The U.S. Air Mobility Doctrine used surprise as an important factor in the deployment of troops (Hickey 1979: 221). Initially the 1/7 Battalion did achieve surprise in the morning of the 14 November and met no resistance during the first vital minutes after their landing. Subsequent to the lift of another company

30 minutes later, the battalion started advancing up a steep hill believed to house the NVA Regiment and they soon made contact with the enemy. However, as the day wore on the landing of troops at the same landing site reduced the factor of surprise and the NVA started attacking the landing site more and more aggressively. The decision to land the entire battalion at the same landing site was made by the Brigade Commander, and then Lieutenant Colonel Moore ordered his companies to keep their platoons together in order to secure enough combat ability against the NVA forces outnumbering them. This left less room for flexibility and initiative from the subordinates.

The initial contact developed as the NVA advanced in still greater numbers, and the terrain meant the company in contact had difficulty fighting as one coherent unit. This led to one of the American platoons being cut off from the rest of the company, and it subsequently retired from the hillside (Coleman 1988: 195) (Moore 1992: 76). The NVA attacks were so forceful that the battalion concentrated on defending itself in and around the landing site. Despite a few attempts, it was not able to reach the encircled Platoon on the hillside (Cash 1985: 14). Due to the severe enemy pressure, the 1/7 Battalion relied heavily on support from indirect fire to keep its defensive perimeter intact (Coleman 1988: 197). The Brigade Commander agreed with Moore to help the battalion defend itself in an effort to gain some initiative with which it might relieve the encircled platoon and attack the enemy forces. The Brigade provided an additional company from a different battalion to reinforce the 1/7 Battalion. This, however, only marginally improved the situation in and around the landing site, as the NVA were able to press an ever-increasing number of forces into their attack and bombard the area with mortar fire, making evacuation of wounded and resupply difficult (Coleman 1988: 201). The individual training and the level of leadership among the Americans made itself known at this point in the battle. Despite being under severe enemy pressure, the American units did not give way and their perimeter was not breached. At every level, the soldiers and their units were able to maintain coherent and effective fire against the attacking NVA forces. The encircled platoon was also able to continue its fight, despite heavy losses which even led to the platoon command being taken over by a non-commissioned officer.

As the day wore on, the Brigade Commander took measure of the situation from his helicopter above the battlefield, and given the general situation, and the NVA's numerical advantage, he decided to reinforce the brigade's efforts in the Ia Drang Valley with an additional battalion, thus doubling the number of American troops on the ground.

In the early hours of the 15 November the second Battalion of the 5th Cavalry Regiment (2/5) was inserted at a landing site some 3,500 metres from 1/7 Battalion. This new landing site was chosen so as to make use of the element of surprise, which the Air Mobility Doctrine relied heavily on (Coleman 1988: 211). The landing and subsequent advance of the 2/5 Battalion was unopposed, but instead of advancing to contact with the NVA from a different direction, the 2/5 joined up with the 1/7 at the original landing site.

With the forces now combined, Lieutenant Colonel Moore coordinated a major attack on the steep hill from where the encircled platoon continued to hold out (Coleman 1988: 219) (Cash 1985: 34) (Moore 1992: 184). The attack was an isolated success and they were able to reach and evacuate the platoon back to the landing site (Coleman 1988: 205) (Cash 1985: 34). Despite being able to extract the encircled platoon, Lieutenant Colonel Moore was unable to put the NVA forces under such pressure that they were in danger of being defeated or obliged to withdraw.

During the next few days, 1/7 Battalion was withdrawn from the area and did not see further involvement in this operation.

Lieutenant Colonel Moore and the 1/7 insertion in the Ia Drang Valley gives us some of lessons about the use of light infantry under an air mobile doctrine. A number of advantages for the battalion become evident on analysing the operation. The unit had massive and effective indirect fire at their disposal, their level of training was high, the level of leadership was decisive and the initial surprise by landing at a time and place of their own choosing helped establish the unit before actual combat broke out. Likewise, there are a number of disadvantages, which the battalion faced during the operation. It was constantly at a numerical disadvantage, a fact enforced by the battalion being inserted in piecemeal fashion. A further disadvantage, now obvious, is that the entire battalion and its reinforcements were inserted at the same landing site, so the initial surprise was completely lost. This must be ascribed to the Brigade Commander, as both the piecemeal insertion and the physical link-up of the two battalions were on his orders. Furthermore, the American losses were substantial: they lost 79 men and had 121 wounded (Cash 1985: 40), thus reducing their readiness for new tasks afterwards and seriously debilitating the battalion as an effective fighting unit.

The 1/7 Battalion was not successful in fulfilling the task given by higher command. On the plus side, it can be argued that by subjecting the NVA to more than 1,000 casualties, they did reduce the NVA Regiment as an effective fighting force. However, they were fighting a defensive battle for the main part of the operation and they lost the initiative early in the battle and never really regained it. Basically, they never came close to actually defeating the NVA Regiment and their survival came to rely mostly upon fire support from artillery and air-assets as well as the level of training among both commanders and individual soldiers.

Rhodesia

The Rhodesian Bush War 1974–1980 was waged between the unrecognized state of Rhodesia in Southern Africa, a former British colony, and an independence movement of two competing insurgency movements under the united umbrella of The Patriotic Front.

As Great Britain relinquished her colonies in Africa during the early 1960s, the white minority in Rhodesia began considering the consequences for themselves and the country as such, in the event of a black majority coming into power. Rhodesia declared unilateral independence in 1965 and from 1966, a small-scale armed insurgency emerged throughout the country. By the early 1970s, the insurgency had reached a level, which the white minority government felt was threatening to the stability of the country. To counter this threat, the Rhodesian Security Forces developed their version of an air mobile doctrine, the Fire Force Doctrine (van der Waag 2015: 269).

The basic idea of Fire Force was to conduct a sort of driven hunt by using air mobile forces. The units were divided into one component driving the opponent in a given direction and another component engaging that enemy from a stationary ambush-like position. This doctrine had some resemblance to the French experience during the insurgency in Algeria. Heavily armed helicopters and flexible deployment of the units on the ground assisted the entire operation. Both Army and Air Force units were needed to conduct the Fire Force operations. On each separate operation, the helicopters were in direct support of the operation, under the command of the Fire Force Commander, while supporting ground-attack aircraft were in indirect support under Air Force Command.

Two regiments of the Rhodesian Army, the Rhodesian Light Infantry (RLI) and the Rhodesian African Rifles (RAR) carried out the Fire Force operations. RLI was an entirely white unit whereas the RAR had black privates and mainly white non-commissioned officers and officers. White pilots and officers primarily staffed the Rhodesian Air Force. This took a heavy toll on the small white population in Rhodesia of only 280,000 (CSO 1978). The Army was only able to field 1,400 men at any one time (Wood 2009: 41 and 75) in a country that was geographically larger than present-day Germany and with an infrastructure insufficiently developed to defeat the insurgency by conventional means. The Air Force was equipped with Alouette III helicopters, a fairly new, small but very sturdy aircraft, and a number of older British fighters and Dakota transport aeroplanes. Flexibility became a mainstay in the Fire Force Doctrine, as this was the only possibility the Rhodesian Government had to counter the insurgency, given the number of personnel and types of material available.

A Fire Force unit was usually made up of a heavily armed Alouette helicopter, where the Fire Force Commander sat, three Alouettes carrying four infantrymen each, a Dakota with 16–20 paratroopers and a land convoy with reserves and specialists. The Fire Force unit were deployable at very short notice, sometimes being briefed when in-flight to their area of insertion. Often the situation was unclear until the Fire Force Commander arrived above the actual area. By arming their helicopters heavily, the Air Force could support the Army units on the ground, who were then able to act overwhelmingly aggressively even though they were often outnumbered. The Rhodesian soldiers were unusually light in their posture, at times inserted wearing only shorts, T-shirts and light shoes, which not only saved weight, but made for quick movement on the ground. This was one of the prerequisites for being able to carry out an effectively driven hunt (Wood 2009: 102) (Cocks 2015: 50). Their basic unit was called a Stick and consisted of four men only, as this was the number the Alouette could carry. Thus, the organization was optimized to fit their material and fully exploit the potential of their Fire Force Doctrine. These special features of the Rhodesian Forces also presented them with a number of constraints. They needed replenishment relatively often and rarely stayed in contact during the dark hours.

Doctrinal standard procedures were important for the Fire Force unit to act efficiently. All sub-units were trained to a high level, their commanders were experienced and had often held various positions in sub-units prior to taking command, and they knew their tasks beforehand (Cocks 2015: 116). In addition, the Rhodesian Army put their regular troops through a demanding regime of continual supplementary training, which, although a drain on units, heightened their collective level of training (Cocks 2015: 51).

The Commander of a Fire Force unit had to show considerable tactical acumen and be able to synchronize the deployment of his forces on the ground and in the air. The usual seven sticks on the ground had to coordinate their actions with the supporting helicopters and often with the support of fighters called in to provide more additional fire support. He was placed in the fire support helicopter, which meant he often had to put himself in harm's way to provide fire support while commanding the battle below. However, this position did give him an excellent and necessary overview of the situation as it developed.

Before 1977 the Fire Force Doctrine had only been used within Rhodesia's own borders. This changed when the Rhodesian Security Forces carried out Operation Dingo in Mozambique on 23 November 1977. The purpose of this operation was to seek and destroy a major insurgency training camp and military headquarters 90 kilometres inside Mozambique. Rhodesian intelligence services placed the number of insurgents in the camp area at 5,000-10,000. They were at various stages of training, ranging from raw recruits to experienced coherent units in trenches and had a variety of weaponry, from small arms to anti-aircraft guns (Wood 2009: 123).

Operation Dingo was carried out with 184 Rhodesian troops on the ground. These comprised 40 members of RLI inserted by helicopter, 48 members of RLI and 96 Special Forces operators from the Rhodesian Special Air Service Regiment (SAS) dropped by parachute. Armed helicopters and fighters from the Rhodesian Air Force supported the units on the ground (Wood 2009: 136).

The operation was initiated by massive air bombardments, which had a devastating and demoralizing effect on the insurgents. The ground troops were then inserted and attacked through the camp area using the Fire Force Doctrine on a large scale. Some of the Rhodesian units were flown out at nightfall but, contrary to custom, the remaining units stayed in the area. The following day they did a mopping-up operation.

According to Rhodesian estimates, the insurgents had no less than 560 killed and a number of prisoners taken (Wood 2009: 171); the exact number of wounded is unknown. There were two Rhodesians killed and twelve wounded, with major material damage to one fighter aircraft, several helicopters and other fighters were hit, but were able to continue their tasks and fly back to Rhodesia. Given a camp area estimated to contain several thousand insurgents, the Rhodesian forces were not entirely successful in defeating all of them. This would seem to be due to the lack of adequate resources and not the Fire Force Doctrine, since the Rhodesians were highly successful in those parts of the camp area they were able to cover with the forces available to them.

Operation Dingo did not demonstrate any visible difference in the efficiency or tactical capabilities shown by the RLI and the SAS. Given the latter was a Special Operations unit, the RLI was clearly a very well-trained and well-led unit, which was one of the prerequisites for the effectiveness of the Fire Force Doctrine or indeed any air mobile doctrine.

The well-known elements of surprise and fire support, aggression and initiative inherent in the Fire Force Doctrine had been tested and proved decisive in a one-sided victory over a vastly superior enemy. The Rhodesian gamble had been to transfer their doctrine used in smaller engagements into a major combat operation and they were largely successful in doing so. They made their gamble for several reasons, one; they did not have the capacity to engage the insurgents in Mozambique with more conventional forces, two; they had trust in their successful experiences from the Bush War within Rhodesia itself, where they were never once defeated in an operation (Wood 2009: 116).

The helicopters were a vital part of the Fire Force Doctrine, providing the flexibility needed. Although about three-quarters of the troops were parachuted into the area of operation during Dingo, the helicopters were still essential for the successful outcome of the operation. They provided flexibility during the landing, fire support, and medical evacuation during the attack, as well as lifting all the troops off the ground following the operation.

Sierra Leone

Operation Palliser in Sierra Leone in 2000 was initiated by the British Government after Sierra Leone had gone through a time of tremendous upheaval, in reverting to its independence from the United Kingdom in 1961.

During the 1990s what was essentially a civil war had raged between an unstable central government and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). Supported by neighbouring Liberia, numerous atrocities had been carried out (Fowler 2004: 58). Several attempts to end the hostilities using private military companies, ECOWAS and the United Nations had all failed and by the beginning of 2000, the capital Freetown was under threat from the RUF (Fowler 2004: 31–42).

The British Government decided to intervene in the conflict and initiated Operation Palliser on 7 May 2000. The Operation had four main objectives, one; stop the RUF offensive, two; secure the population of Freetown, three; assist UN personnel, four; evacuate foreign nationals in Sierra Leone (Fowler 2004: 78).

The first unit deployed during Operation Palliser was the First Battalion of the Parachute Regiment (1 PARA). This unit consisted of three infantry companies, a heavy weapons company, a headquarters company as well as a number of support and command elements, in all about 1,000 men. The entire operation was led from the United Kingdom but had a brigadier working alongside the British High Commissioner to Sierra Leone to coordinate the efforts between the strategic and the tactical levels of command (Iron 2019: 68). The coordination between the levels of command does not seem to have provided any obstacles during the operation. Meanwhile a British Maritime Group was being stood up in the Mediterranean and sent steaming towards Sierra Leone (Fowler 2004: 90) (Iron 2019: 73).

1 PARA received their first warning of a possible deployment on the morning of May 5 and during the day they gathered further information and started alerting their commanders and sub-units. 1 PARA was on a five days' notice to move state of readiness, as were the attached support and command elements (Fowler 2004: 84) (Iron 2019: 72). The Commanding Officer of 1 PARA, Lieutenant Colonel Paul Gibson, gave his preliminary orders on 6 May, these included the following: 1. Establish Battalion Headquarters at Lungi Airport outside Freetown, 2. Secure the Lungi area and the Aberdeen peninsula in Freetown, 3. On order, secure the residence of the British High Commissioner, 4. Establish an evacuation area at the United Nations Headquarters at the Mammy Yoko Hotel in Freetown and an alternative evacuation area at Lungi Airport (Fowler 2004: 84). As A Company of 1 PARA was away on exercise, they had D Company from the Second Battalion of the Parachute Regiment attached at full organizational strength (Fowler 2004: 79) (Iron 2019: 70).

Within 24 hours, the entire Operation Palliser force gathered from different parts of the UK and transported to South Cerney Airfield in the south-western part of the country. From here, they flew to a French base at Dakar, which would also act as a Forward Supply Area for the unit. The actual insertion into Sierra Leone started when C Company flew from Dakar to Lungi Airport on the 7 May. By the end of the 8 May 1 PARA and the rest of the units had established themselves at Lungi Airport, a mere 64 hours after their initial warning.

1 PARA deployed in a very light configuration in order to carry out both the strategic lift to Dakar and the tactical lift into Lungi faster and with more personnel. Ammunition for the initial units on the ground was prioritized and each soldier in the battalion took only his Bergen pack with those personal items of uniform most needed (Fowler 2004: 84) (Iron 2019: 72). This, however, meant that the battalion initially had no heavy support weapons with them and would struggle to maintain combat efficiency over a longer period (Fowler 2004: 81).

As 1 PARA deployed at Lungi Airport, the situation in Freetown escalated and the British High Commissioner requested that the evacuation of British and other foreigners commence. Freetown itself is separated from the Lungi Airport area by a bay. As the battalion had brought only very few vehicles and no boats, Lieutenant Colonel Gibson ordered D Company inserted into Freetown by helicopter. This was done by an airlift using the only two Chinook helicopters available at this stage and with only a few minutes warning, it flew directly to the area next to the Mammy Yoko Hotel, where they established themselves and prepared to evacuate the civilians. The Company Commander and his men had had only the very short flight to prepare themselves for this task. Despite massive violent demonstrations and local firefights, D Company evacuated more than 400 people, who were flown to Lungi Airport (Fowler 2004: 88) (Iron 2019: 77). The training standard and experience of the British troops helped de-escalate the situation and the actual evacuation took place without any firefights (Iron 2019: 77) (Fowler 2004: 87).

During the first days of the operation, the battalion inserted the Pathfinder Platoon, supported by a mortar section, at an important crossroad 25 kilometres from Lungi Airport. This was partly done to protect the approaches to the airport, but also as a come-on measure to test the RUF's willingness to engage in a firefight. Early in the morning on 17 May, the unit was attacked by approximately 40 combatants from the RUF. The attackers were well-armed with automatic and antitank weapons and opened fire upon being challenged by the Pathfinders. After a relatively short firefight, they withdrew leaving a number of dead. The Pathfinders took no casualties themselves (Fowler 2004: 88) (Iron 2019: 84). The training standard and experience of the British troops saw them balance initial restraint with subsequent aggression. The Pathfinders were replaced later in the day, worn down after ten days of isolated deployment, including patrolling and combat activity (Fowler 2004: 89).

Following the British Maritime Group's arrival in Sierra Leone, 1 PARA had more helicopters, heavier equipment and much better logistical support than when it was initially deployed. However, after the first ten days of deployment, some soldiers in the battalion started showing signs of malaria and the decision was made to have it replaced with 42 Commando Battalion aboard the ships (Iron 2019: 85). On the 25 May the handover between the two battalions was complete, 18 days after 1 PARA had initially landed at Lungi Airport.

Administratively it was quite a feat to get the unit ready at such short notice. Flexibility, especially from D Company and the supporting units which had to cooperate with a coherent unit, a prerequisite for the rapid deployment (Iron 2019: 71) (Fowler 2004: 81). This was shown again during the operation itself, as the commanders and troops repeatedly found themselves in situations where their initiative, flexibility and, at times, aggression meant the difference between success and failure. Operation Palliser was a huge success as the unit met the objectives that their higher command had laid down before and during the operation. However, it also shows the limitations of light infantry as 1 PARA was at its end by the time it was relieved and they had only been once tested in an actual combat situation, albeit successfully.

Conclusion

Light Infantry in air mobile operations can achieve success in its operations, provided it adheres to an air mobility doctrine specifically designed for it.

The three historic cases have shown a number of common denominators central to a successful outcome of the operations, or in the American case, the units' survival.

Adherence to an air mobile doctrine, command and control measures and the level of training, experience and mind-set of the commanders were vital for the development on the ground. But a number of other elements must be recognized as well. Surprise, fire support, aggression when needed, flexibility, communication and the units' organization and equipment all had an impact on how well the units handled themselves during the operations.

In Rhodesia and on Operation Palliser, the units were continuously able to achieve surprise and local superiority due to their flexible use of helicopters and well-trained units, as were the Americans initially in the Ia Drang Valley. The Americans, however, lost the initiative and went into an almost static defence when they reinforced their efforts by positioning an ever-growing number of troops in the same place. Operating contrary to their own air mobility doctrine, their survival was largely attributable to their well-trained commanders and men, fire support and well-functioning communication. Their decision to put a heavy load on each of their soldiers in the fire, contrary to the Rhodesians and the British, also meant, they were able to fight a major battle for more than 24 hours.

In particular, the Rhodesian use of the Fire Force Doctrine tells us something about the effectiveness of proper doctrine. The difference between the day-to-day Fire Force operations and Operation Dingo lies not only in the numbers of both Rhodesians and insurgents. It lies, as much in the type of unit and material the Rhodesians were able to take on. At their camp in Mozambique, the insurgents were able to fight a more coherent type of battle than they could when taken by surprise in the Rhodesian bush. Still, the surprise, flexibility, fire support and aggressiveness with which the Rhodesians conducted the battle proved the doctrine's usefulness in a more conventional type of battle.

An air mobile doctrine puts a great deal of responsibility on its commanders. Relatively junior officers need to make significant decisions, often at a minute's notice and without the support of designated staff. All three cases have shown the need for absolutely clear command and control measures, which allows the commander to make full use of the means at his disposal.

Designation as a "light" unit means that the unit is inserted without all the equipment and material it might need, which makes it dependent on external support. If this support is available when needed, the three historic cases have shown that there is great potential in light infantry units under an air mobile doctrine and that success can be achieved against all odds.

Contemporary context

As mentioned, this article has looked at historic cases to assess how future deployment of the XIII Battalion of the Slesvig Regiment of Foot might achieve success. As a light infantry battalion, it needs to be trained and inserted under an air mobile doctrine. What this doctrine should comprise, is not for this article to conclude. However, it would seem foolhardy not to take lessons from history.

Undoubtedly, deployment will be dependent on a number of different factors. After all, the Baltic States differ geographically from The Arctic, North Africa or the Middle East. Certainly the mandate and Rules of Engagement under which a unit is deployed holds great importance as troops on the ground will act and react differently according to what type of operation they are on. Is the unit acting as a police force, Sierra Leone, or fighting for its own survival, Vietnam and Rhodesia? The type of enemy forces that the unit may encounter differs from demonstrators to insurgents and further on to peer opponent forces. It is undoubtedly more challenging to conduct military operations against an opponent with a capable air defence and command and control capability. Still, this only makes the deductions from this article more applicable today as they may well help the unit survive as an effective and coherent fighting force. Partly the American, and certainly the Rhodesian cases show it was possible to use the air mobile doctrine in a more conventional context, provided the troops involved were sufficiently well-trained.

What the three historic cases have shown is that, no matter the geography, the type of enemy forces or the mandate for the operation, an air mobile doctrine in some form has given the light infantry units involved a platform upon which to build their training. The doctrines used have been different, but have shared the same basic tenets: providing a light force with flexibility as compensation for the lack of those heavy support weapons that are a mainstay with heavier infantry units. With an air mobile doctrine, the XIII Battalion will have a foundation from which to train and operate, no matter where or what type of operation they are in and no matter whom they are up against. This in itself may not warrant success, but it makes it easier to put forward realistic objectives for the unit. Such a doctrine can either be developed by the Danish Armed Forces or be copied from others, preferably from those nations we will be likely to work with. What is necessary is for the doctrine to incorporate those lessons learned from these three historic examples.

One might take inspiration from the British Joint Doctrine Note 1/20 (Air Manoeuvre) (MOD (UK) 2020), which would certainly aid the services in the Danish Armed Forces in developing doctrines of their own.

The doctrine must include clear command and control measures that allow even junior officers to make fast and comprehensive decisions in order to provide the units with the necessary agility. This is not a given fact in a world where technology makes high-level centralized command structures the norm for military units. A high level of training using the doctrine to provide fundamental guidance throughout, and recruitment of experienced commanders with a mind-set aligned with the doctrine, is a prerequisite for successfully using the doctrine and taking full advantage of its possibilities.

The ability to achieve surprise, use fire support, display requisite aggression, show flexibility and possess the mental capacity to communicate on many levels will be crucial for all personnel in a light infantry unit. The units' organization and equipment needs careful consideration. If the organization and equipment does not support the doctrine, the unit will not be able to deliver the expected results, it will be in danger of being squandered away, or even worse, it may even face disaster during an operation.

Competing Interests

I have no competing interests concerning the content or the units involved in the article. As a Military Analyst at the royal Danish Defense Academy my interests only concern the entirety of the Danish Defense and not individual units or persons.

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